

## Matthew 21:18-23:39

### Overview

Recall the structure of the section marked off by the third announcement of the passion (Table 1, chart). The entire section begins with narrative (20:17-21:17), but once the Lord arrives in Jerusalem, reported speech dominates (21:18-25:45). Each of these in turn can be divided into two parts, based on the involvement of the Jewish leaders .

		Genre	
		Narrative	Exposition
Participants	Disciples	20:17-34 Final Ascent	Ch. 24-25 Olivet Discourse
	Jewish Leaders	21:1-17 Triumphal Entry	21:18-23:39 Great Debate

*Table 1: Structure of ch. 20b-25*

- The entry into Jerusalem proper (21:1-17) engages the final conflict with the religious leaders, which is not explicit during the journey up to the Mount of Olives (20:17-34).
- The audience for the extensive debate and exposition is first the Jewish leaders (21:18-23:39), then the disciples (ch. 24-25).

We now look at the third of these four sections, the great debate between the Lord and the Jewish leaders.

### 21:18-23:39 The Great Debate

This section is chiasmic (Figure 1, chart). It is framed by curses on two instances of hypocrisy: the Fig Tree, and the religious leaders. Then it moves in to instruction to the disciples, and finally to two sections dealing with the chief priests and the Pharisees. First the chief priests and elders attack him, and he responds mainly with parables. Then the Pharisees, who have been standing by all the while (21:45), take the lead, and he answers their test questions. His first words to the chief priests, and his last words to the Pharisees, are strikingly similar: he asks each group a question that they do not dare to answer. The final curse focuses on the scribes and the Pharisees.

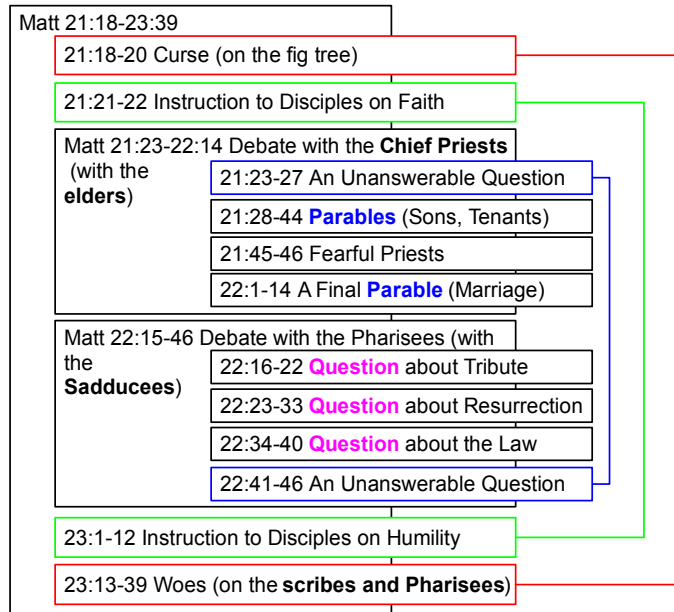


Figure 1: The Great Debate, Matt 21-23

In 16:21, the Lord predicted that his opposition would come from “the elders and chief priests and scribes” (a single article governing them all). In this critical debate, all three appear, together with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. It is useful to clarify the meanings of these terms. They fall into two groups (Table 2, chart).

The three titles that appear in 16:21 are *functional*, and describe the three groups that made up the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews.<sup>1</sup>

		Theological Parties	
		Pharisees	Sadducees
Functional Groups in the Sanhedrin	Chief Priests		X
	Elders		
	Scribes	X	

Table 2: Relation between Functional and Theological titles

- The Elders are the leading lay families. In Matthew, except for 15:2, they are always associated with the priests. Joseph of Arimathaea, a rich man (27:57) whom Mark (15:43) and Luke (23:50) call a member of the council, would fall into this category, and dissented from their opposition to the Lord (Luke 23:51).
- The Chief priests are the clergy, descendants of Aaron and responsible for the ceremonies in the temple.
- The Scribes were students of the Scriptures. Matthew, who is also called Levi, may have been a member of this group. Recall that in the OT the Levites were responsible for teaching the people (Deut 17:9; Jer 18:18; Hag 2:11; Mal 2:7). Ezra (7:6) is a prototype:

Ezr 7:10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

The other two titles, Sadducee and Pharisee, are theological. In principle, someone from any function could belong to any party, but there appear to have been some alliances.

- The Sadducees were elite, sophisticated, and denied the resurrection. At the time of our Lord, they dominated the priesthood:
 

Act 5:17 Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees)
- The Pharisees were allied more with the common people, and were more literalistic in their handling of Scripture. Throughout Matthew, they are usually<sup>2</sup> associated with the

1 It is interesting to contemplate the parallel between this triple and the titles for leadership in the church. Both have a group known as elders. The pastor-teacher corresponds to the scribe, with his focus on the Word of God, while the chief priests, responsible for enforcing the standards of the Levitical law, may be aligned with the role of overseer. During the monarchy, there was also a tripartite governing body, composed of Levites, priests, and the chief of the fathers (2 Chr 19:8, under Jehoshaphat). But there is an important difference. In Judaism, these are three distinct groups of people. But in the church, all three titles are applied to the same group.

2 They are mentioned 22 times in Matthew: 4x by themselves (of which only 9:3 refers to a character in the

scribes (“scribes and Pharisees”), suggesting that their focus on the Scripture led them to take a more literal view.

One further detail is worth noting. The Lord addresses the Chief priests and elders with parables, but he engages the Pharisees in straightforward question and answer. We saw in ch. 13 that the purpose of parables is to conceal the truth:

Mat 13:10 And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? 11 He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.

This difference suggests that the Lord is more sympathetic with the Pharisees than with the chief priests. And in fact, they appear to have been more receptive to the gospel. We know of two Pharisees by name who became believers (Nicodemus and Saul of Tarsus), but not of any Sadducees (though there were believing priests, Acts 6:7).

### **21:18-19 Cursing the Fig Tree**

The section begins as he returns to the city from Bethany. The episode starts off as a metaphor on hypocrisy, which opens the inclusion that ends with ch. 23, but the disciples ask a question that provides a lesson on answered prayer.

**18 Now in the morning as he returned into the city, he hungered. 19 And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only,**--It might seem unreasonable of the Lord to expect a fig tree to have figs in March-April, at the season of Passover. But in fact the fig trees in this region set their fruit before the leaves appear, and it is edible, though not as tasty as when it is ripe (Figure 2, chart). So a fig tree with leaves is advertising that it has fruit as well—immature fruit, but fruit that can be eaten, and that will be the first fruit to ripen as the season progresses. See ISBE under “Fig, Fig Tree” and the paragraph on “Early Figs.”



Figure 2: Early figs on a budding tree  
<http://newbiblicalunderstanding.info/figs.and.leaf.jpg>

A tree with leaves but no fruit is thus an apt illustration of hypocrisy, a theme that comes into strong focus at the end of this section. The Lord warned of hypocrisy in the Sermon on the Mount (6:2, 5, 16; 7:5) and has twice called the Pharisees and their associates “hypocrites” (15:7; 16:3). Now he has confronted the priests by

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immediate narrative); 11x with the Pharisees; and 7x in association with the chief priests as part of the Sanhedrin.

cleansing the temple, and anticipates the conflict that awaits him. The fig tree dramatically illustrates the state of the religious elite.

The Lord may be led to make this connection by Micah's use of a similar figure in the time of Isaiah. Micah begins with the metaphor of the fruit.

Mic 7:1 Woe is me! for I am as when they have gathered the summer fruits, as the grape gleanings of the vintage: *there is* no cluster to eat: my soul desired the firstripe fruit.

Then he expounds the metaphor: it represents a corrupt society.

Mic 7:2 The good *man* is perished out of the earth: and *there is* none upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood; they hunt every man his brother with a net. 3 That they may do evil with both hands earnestly, the prince asketh, and the judge *asketh* for a reward; and the great *man*, he uttereth his mischievous desire: so they wrap it up. 4 The best of them *is* as a brier: the most upright *is sharper* than a thorn hedge: the day of thy watchmen *and* thy visitation cometh; now shall be their perplexity. 5 Trust ye not in a friend, put ye not confidence in a guide: keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom. 6 For the son dishonoureth the father, the daughter riseth up against her mother, the daughter in law against her mother in law; a man's enemies *are* the men of his own house.

The term “first-ripe fruit” in v. 1 actually refers to early figs, which, if they do not fall from the tree, become the sweetest of the fruit as they ripen.

**and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig tree withered away.**--There is a difference, though, between Micah and the Lord. Micah merely laments the lack of fruit, and commits himself to the Lord:

Mic 7:7 Therefore I will look unto the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation: my God will hear me.

The Lord curses the tree. Micah says, “Woe is me” (v. 1). The Lord says, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees.” A prophet can condemn the sin of the people, and reports the judgment that the Lord will bring, but only the Lord can bring judgment.<sup>3</sup>

## **20-22, Instructing the Disciples about Faith**

**20 And when the disciples saw it, they marvelled, saying, How soon is the fig tree withered away! 21 Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done.**--This is the second time in Matthew that the Lord has encouraged believing prayer in this way. At the mount of transfiguration, when the Lord healed the lunatic boy whom the disciples were unable to help, he explained their failure with the same image (chart):

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<sup>3</sup> Even Elisha in 2 Kings 2:23-24, cursing the mocking children, does so “in the name of the Lord.”

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Mat 17:20 for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.

Here, as there, the Lord makes the promise dependent on faith, but adds “doubt not.”

**22 And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.**--The Lord extends the promise beyond fig trees and mountains. He promises that believing prayer will bring results.

This is not the only passage in the NT that promises answered prayer, and it is worthwhile to compare two others that at first glance seem to offer different requirements:

Joh 15:7 If ye **abide in me**, and **my words abide in you**, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.

Joh 15:16 Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that **whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.** (also 14:13, 14; 16:23, 24)

So we have, apparently, three different requirements: belief, Christ’s words abiding in us, and asking in the Lord’s name.

It’s worthwhile to inquire how these are related to each other (chart).

Faith and our Lord’s words:

Rom 10:17 So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

His words and his name:

1Ki 21:5 But Jezebel his wife came to him, and said unto him, Why is thy spirit so sad, that thou eatest no bread? 6 And he said unto her, Because I spake unto Naboth the Jezreelite, and said unto him, Give me thy vineyard for money; or else, if it please thee, I will give thee *another* vineyard for it: and he answered, I will not give thee my vineyard. 7 And Jezebel his wife said unto him, Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? arise, *and* eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. 8 So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name, and sealed *them* with his seal, and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles that *were* in his city, dwelling with Naboth.

His name and faith:

Joh 3:35 The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand.

If we understand these conditions together, we see that they reinforce one another. The kind of faith that the Lord has in mind is faith that is grounded in the word of God and that asks for things in order to advance the Lord Jesus’ objectives. Such prayers are assured of the Father’s attention.

### **21:23-22:14 Challenge from the Chief Priests**

**23 And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching,**--The first attack is led by two components of the Sanhedrin, the chief priests and the elders. The scribes don't emerge by name until the final curse, though the technical nature of the questions brought by the Pharisees suggest that the scribes may be involved in that part of the conversation as well.

### **21:23b-27 The Lord Responds with a Question**

**and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?**--It is interesting to compare their challenge with the observation made by the people (chart):

Mat 7:28 And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: 29 For he taught them as *one* having authority, and not as the scribes.

The custom of the scribes was to quote other authorities to substantiate their positions. Their view of authority, like that of the chief priests, was extrinsic: you must be authorized by somebody that everyone respects. But the Lord's authority was intrinsic. Like the OT prophets, he simply said, "Thus saith the Lord."

**24 And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?**--The reference to John is not just a rhetorical trick. John was the forerunner, the one sent to prepare the way before the Messiah:

Mat 3:1 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, 2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. 3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias [40:3], saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Matthew makes clear that John, in turn, was authenticated by Isaiah's prophecy. So the Lord is linking his ministry with John's. "John was sent by the Lord, and I am carrying on the work of John, so I have the same authority that he did."

Of course, our Lord's authority was far greater than that of John, but to make his case he only needs to cite John.

**And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?**--They are probably recalling the stinging words that John addressed to them in his preaching.

Mat 3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: 9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to *our* father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these

stones to raise up children unto Abraham. 10 And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Recall that these two categories, the Pharisees and Sadducees, subsume all the members of the Sanhedrin—the chief priests were Sadducees (Acts 5:17), while the scribes tended to be Pharisees. John had condemned them all, and clearly, they had not heeded his teaching.

**26 But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.**--They are caught in their own fascination with external authority. To them, it doesn't matter whether John was right or wrong, just whether he was respected as an authority. And he was, so they dared not condemn him. They illustrate the warning of Solomon,

Pro 29:25 The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall be safe.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the title they are willing to entertain with respect to John (“a prophet”) is the same that the multitude feels comfortable attributing to the Lord when they enter the city (21:11). They are not uncomfortable recognizing him as a prophet, whom they can neglect as they please. (As Sadducees, they recognized only the books of Moses as authoritative, not the writings or the prophets.) It is his claim to be the Christ, the Son of David who comes in the name of the Lord, that they cannot stomach.

**27 And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.**--Since our Lord traces his authority through John, and they will not take a position on the authority of John, they cannot expect to understand his.

## **21:28-22:14 The Lord Responds in Parables**

Before considering the parables individually, it is helpful to compare them (Table 3, chart). There is a natural progression as we move through the three:

- The character who corresponds to **God** grows in importance
- The **penalty** for those who resist him becomes greater
- The **kingdom** moves from something external to the event being described.
- The **focus** moves from John, to Jesus rejected, to Jesus exalted.

### **21:28-33 Parable of the Two Sons**

In the first of the three parables, the focus is on daily events in a small household.

**28 But what think ye? A certain man had two sons;**--The story turns around two sons and their relation to their father. One outwardly appears to please his father, but in fact does not do what the father asks. The second appears to resist his father, but in fact achieves the father's objectives.

The Lord may have in mind the history of Isaac and his sons Jacob and Esau. Remember that Isaac earnestly desired children, and prayed for his wife when she was barren (chart):

Gen 25:21 And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she *was* barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

She bore twins, Esau and Jacob. Esau was Isaac's favorite:

Gen 25:28 And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of *his* venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.

But in the end, his conduct brought his father grief:

Gen 26:34 And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite: 35 Which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah.

	Two sons	Wicked Tenants	Wedding Feast
Overall Characteristics			
Characters in tension	Father, good son, bad son	Householder, husbandmen, servants, son	King, son, stubborn guests, later guests, ill-dressed guest
Scripture?	Isaac with Jacob and Esau	Isa 5, Psa 118	Prov 9; Isa 25:6; Zeph 1:7-8
Consequence	Others preferred before you	Destroyed	Destroyed, city burned
Ref to kingdom	Kdom of God: pubs & harlots go before you	Kdom of God: given to another nation	Kdom of Heaven: the whole feast.
Focus	John	Jesus rejected	Jesus glorified
Correspondences			
God	Father	Householder	King
Prophets		Servants	Servants
Jewish leaders	Bad son	Husbandmen	Them that were bidden
Gentiles		Other husbandmen	
Common people	Good son		Travelers in the highways
Jesus and his fate		Son: killed	Son: marriage

Table 3: The Parables of the Great Debate

Isaac was his mother's boy, and in fact deceived his father into giving him the blessing. But ultimately, he is the one through whom Isaac received the descendants that he desired.

If the Lord does indeed have this story in mind, it sharpens the implied criticism of the chief priests, for it compares them with Esau, whose descendants (the Edomites) became one of Israel's perennial enemies, rather than Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes. One can hardly think of a worse insult for someone who values his Israelite heritage than to compare him with Esau!

**and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard.--**This vineyard is plainly a family affair, something that a man and his sons could manage. A small vineyard as part



of the homestead was the family vision in Israel (chart).

1 Ki 4:25 And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon.

**29 He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went.**--The verb “repent” is central. It recalls John’s message, picked up by the Lord, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” and prepares us for the reference to John in v. 32.

**30 And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not.**--As with Jacob and Esau, one appears to do the father’s will, but in fact does not, while the other appears less compliant, but ends up fulfilling the father’s vision. In terms of the fig tree, one has leaves but no fruit; the other is slow to show leaves, but in fact ends up bearing fruit. (The fact that fig trees can set their fruit even before the leaves makes them particularly suited to this illustration.)

**31 Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first.**--Even the chief priests recognize intellectually the difference between words and actions.

**Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.**--The Lord gives his shocking conclusion, before drawing the parallel back to the proverb. The Jewish leaders looked down on the publicans (who gathered taxes for Rome) and the harlots (who disregarded biblical standards of conduct), but the Lord says that these people will enter the kingdom before the priests do.

The term “kingdom of God” describes the kingdom from the outside.<sup>4</sup> They think of themselves as heirs of the kingdom, but he represents both them and the publicans and harlots as outside.

But there is still hope. They are not excluded, but they are humbled, pushed to the back of the line. They must recognize that, like Esau, their vaunted special position with God ends up being of no value to them.

**32 For John**—He returns to the topic he raised in his initial question, the role of the forerunner and their failure to recognize him.

**came unto you in the way of righteousness,**--The expression is a common one throughout the book of Proverbs (8:20; 12:28; 16:17, 31; 17:23; 21:16, 21), which is the only book in the Greek OT that has it. Here is one example:

Pro 16:31 The hoary head *is* a crown of glory, *if* it be found in the way of righteousness.

“Way” means “path.” Here and elsewhere, the expression refers to practical righteousness, living the kind of life that God requires. John gave every evidence of being a godly man, just what one would expect of a prophet. And his message was that people should repent of their ungodliness, and walk in that way with him.

**and ye believed him not:**--Earlier, Matthew tells us of their thoughts among themselves when

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4 Foster, NTS 48:4 (2002) 487-499.

discussing the Lord's question. They admitted that they had not believed John:

Mat 21:25 And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?

But the Lord knows their thoughts, and here exposes them openly.

**but the publicans and the harlots believed him:**--They did heed his message, and turn from their sin. Like the first son, they "repented."

**and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.**--In spite of the evidence in the conversion of the publicans and harlots, the leaders persisted in their unbelief.

### **21:33-44 Parable of the Wicked Tenants**

The first parable described a small household whose vineyard could be tended by family members. The second envisions the owner of large estates, who travels internationally and hires others to manage his much larger vineyard.

**33 Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower,**--The OT background to this parable is much clearer. The Lord is quoting Isaiah's introduction to his song of the vineyard from the LXX (chart). In Greek the highlighted phrases are even closer than in English.

Isa 5:1 Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a <b>song</b> of my beloved touching his vineyard. My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: 2 And he <b>fenced it</b> , and gathered out the stones thereof, and <b>planted it with the choicest vine</b> , and <b>built a tower</b> in the midst of it, and also <b>made a winepress</b> therein:	Matt 21:33 Hear another <b>parable</b> : There was a certain householder, which <b>planted a vineyard</b> , and <b>hedged</b> it round about, and <b>digged a winepress</b> in it, and <b>built a tower</b>
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But the vineyard fails. In Isaiah, the criticism lies with the vine plants, while in Matthew, the focus is on the people whom the owner leaves in charge of the vineyard. Isaiah is condemning the entire nation, in preparation for God's judgment of the captivities:

Isa 5:5 And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be **eaten up**; *and* break down the wall thereof, and it shall be **trodden down**: 6 And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

In Isaiah's version, the "bad guys" are wild animals who eat the vines and the young fruit and trample the vineyard. They correspond to the pagan nations whom the Lord allows to abuse Israel. The word translated "trodden down" (literally a trampling, a mire) is a favorite of Isaiah (who has four of its seven instances). He uses it to describe the result of the Assyrian invasion:

Isa 10:6 I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my

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wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. (cf. 28:18)

No doubt, our Lord's hearers, recalling this context, immediately associate the wicked husbandmen with the pagan nations. They would love to have the Romans, those unclean tenants of God's vineyard, thrown out.

But there is further depth to Isaiah's imagery, which Ezekiel exploits when he anticipates that it is the shepherds of Israel, their rulers, who do the eating and trampling:

Eze 34:2 Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks? 3 Ye **eat the fat**, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock. ... 19 And *as for* my flock, they eat that which ye have **trodden** with your feet; and they drink that which ye have fouled with your feet.

So the Lord's adaptation of the parable is completely consistent with the broader context.

**and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country:**--Against the background of Isaiah, the householder is "the Lord of Hosts" and the husbandmen are those who rule over the nation of Israel. During the first century, this would be the Sanhedrin, made up of the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes.

**34 And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it.**--Seventeen times, from 2 Kings to Zechariah, the OT describes the prophets as God's servants, either in the first person ("my servants the prophets") or in the third ("his servants the prophets") (chart). If the householder is God, the servants are the prophets whom he sent repeatedly to his people, to warn them of their sin and coming judgment.

**35 And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise.**--Throughout the OT, the rulers of the people abused the prophets.

- Jezebel and the prophets of the Lord (1 Kings 18:4, 13)
- Ahab and Micaiah (1 Kings 22)
- Joash and Zechariah (2 Chr 24:20-22)
- Jehoiakim and Jeremiah (Jer 26:21)

Even in the days of Nehemiah, the animosity of the nation for God's servants was legendary:

Neh 9:26 Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and **slew thy prophets** which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations.

**37 But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son.**--It is sometimes said that the Lord Jesus never claimed to be the Son of God, but here he clearly identifies himself as the son of the owner of the vineyard, who from Isaiah is the Lord of Hosts.

**38 But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. 39 And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him.**--Perhaps they think that the arrival of the son means that the father has died and the son has come to claim his inheritance. If they do away with the son, the land will be without owner, and they can claim it through adverse possession.<sup>5</sup>

**40 When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?**--The Lord invites the chief priests to comment on the treatment of the wicked husbandmen.

**41 They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.**--They do not initially recognize that the parable is about them. From Isaiah, they are still thinking of the husbandmen as parallel to Assyria, connected with the pagan nations, and they are cheering at the suggestion that God will throw out the Romans.

**42 Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?**--Now the Lord takes them back to Psa 118, from which the people took the welcoming phrases, “Hosanna, blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” in v. 9. That came from vv. 25-26; this citation comes from vv. 22-23. In the structure of the Psalm (Figure 5, chart), both are spoken by the House of Aaron.

In its original setting in Psa 118 (probably written to celebrate the rebuilding of the temple under Ezra), this verse refers to Isaiah’s warnings (Isa 28:14-16; 8:13-14) that the people had forsaken the Lord, the rock of Israel (Deut 32:4, 15, 18, 31, 32), and the house of Aaron recognizes the righteous Israelite who has come to the temple as the personification of is to recognize that earlier failing. Now the Lord calls his contemporary incumbents of this position to their responsibility to recognize him as “the Lord” who “suddenly come[s] to his temple” (Mal 3:1).

**43 Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation<sup>6</sup> bringing forth the fruits thereof.**--To frame this important condemnation from the OT, the Lord now expounds their own interpretation of the parable into a prophecy of their judgment, forming a chiasm<sup>7</sup> around the verse from Psa 118 (Table 4, chart). v. 43 corresponds point by point to the second half of their answer:

- The **vineyard** is the kingdom of God, not just the nation Israel as with Isaiah. He uses the expression “of God” that views the kingdom from without, something that is not their inalienable right and from which they can be excluded.
- The **other husbandmen** correspond to “a nation.” The word εθνος, is the standard LXX translation of גוי, often referring to gentile nations, but here only one nation is in view, identified in v. 44.

5 Derrett, *Law in the NT*, pp 300-306 claims that if an owner failed to collect rent for four years, he forfeited title.

6 Εθνος, the standard LXX translation for גוי.

7 Noted by Luz.

- This new nation will generate the **fruit** that God seeks. Again, we are drawn back to the image of the fig tree. The Lord expects fruit from his plantation, and will take whatever steps are needed to secure that fruit.

**44 And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.**--This verse amplifies the destruction promised in v. 41a, and at the same time clarifies the identity of the “nation” that will supplant the Jewish leaders.

41 They say unto him, He will miserably <b>destroy</b> those wicked men,	44 And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall <b>be broken</b> : but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will <b>grind him</b> to powder.
and will let out his <b>vineyard</b> unto <b>other husbandmen</b> , which shall <b>render him the fruits</b> in their seasons.	43 Therefore say I unto you, The <b>kingdom of God</b> shall be taken from you, and given to <b>a nation bringing forth the fruits</b> thereof.
42 Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?	
<i>Table 4: Chiasm in 21:41-44</i>	

There are several OT prophecies about the stone, which we have studied before (in Isaiah 8 and, Isa 28. The Lord quoted one of them (Psa 118:22-23) in v. 42. v. 44 refers to two more, Isa 8 and Dan 2. Table 5 (chart) shows how the Lord combines them.<sup>8</sup>

We have already considered Psa 118. Isa 8:14-15 predicts the stone of stumbling on which many will fall and be broken, which is the first half of Matt 21:44. The second half of the verse is a reference to Dan 2:23, which is the little stone in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the great statue that falls on the feet of the statue and crushes it to pieces, so that it blows away “like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors.” These prophecies from Isaiah and Daniel show how the Lord is going to do what the priests said he would do in 41a, “miserably destroy those wicked men.”

But once we are in Daniel 2, we should consider the context. The passage summarizes the geopolitical history of the world: the four great empires (Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman). The little stone (2:44) represents a coming kingdom that will supplant them all and rule the entire earth. Isn’t that just what the Lord declared in v. 42? God will take the authority away from the Jewish leaders, and transfer it to “a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.” This is the kingdom established by the little stone, the kingdom of God about which this entire gospel is centered. And it is a kingdom marked, not by territory, nor by orthodoxy, but by fruitfulness. Fig trees with leaves but no fruit have no place in this coming kingdom.

<sup>8</sup> Scofield notes on v. 44, “Israel stumbled over Christ; the church is built upon Christ; Gentile world-dominion will be broken by Christ.” But we should probably understand the Lord as warning Israel with all three, not lecturing them on dispensational distinctions.

Matthew 21:18-23:39

Ps 118:22, 23	Isa 8:14-15	Dan 2:34, 44	Matt 21:42-44
22 The stone <i>which</i> the builders refused is become the head <i>stone</i> of the corner.			42 Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner:
23 This is the LORD'S doing; it <i>is</i> marvellous in our eyes.			this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?
		44 And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a <b>kingdom</b>	43 Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a <b>nation</b> bringing forth the fruits thereof.
	14 And he shall be ... for a stone of stumbling ... 15 And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken.		44 And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken:
		34 Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces.	but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

Table 5: References to "Stone" prophecies in Matt 21:42-44

**21:45-46 The Chief Priests Understand but Fear**

**45 And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables,**—The reference here to Pharisees is a link to the next section, where the focus is no longer on the Chief Priests and elders (21:23), but on the Pharisees (22:15). It shows us that though different groups were leading the attack at different times, all of his adversaries were gathered around, seeking to discredit him.

**they perceived that he spake of them.**--He has now made clear that the villains of the story are not the foreign nations whom Isaiah originally had in mind, but the shepherds of Israel whom Ezekiel described. He has snapped the trap on them, and we can imagine how angry they are.

**46 But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet.**--But as in v. 46, they are so fearful of people that they cannot yet carry out

their animosity.

### **22:1-14 Parable of the Marriage Feast**

Now he drives his condemnation home with a final parable. God is no longer just a father or the owner of great estates, but a king. We are no longer seeking to get into the kingdom, but are viewing a description of the kingdom itself. And Jesus is no longer overshadowed by his teacher or the heir, but the guest of honor at a joyful feast.

**22:1 And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said, 2 The kingdom of heaven**—The previous two parables described the kingdom as something external, a goal we seek to reach (v. 31) or something that can be taken from one person and given to another (43). Now we are in the kingdom, watching people arrive.

**is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son,**--Weddings in the first century were marked by joyous feasting, often over several days. By combining the images of the coming kingdom with a joyful feast, the Lord calls to mind the OT image of the great feast that will mark the coming day of the Lord (chart). Isaiah introduces the concept in the eighth and seventh century,

Isa 25:6 And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined.

And Zephaniah develops it in a way that our Lord extends, during the time of Josiah just before the rise of Babylon in the late seventh century,

Zep 1:7 Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord GOD: for the day of the LORD *is* at hand: for the LORD hath prepared a sacrifice, he hath **bid his guests** **הקדיש קראיו** . 8  
And it shall come to pass in the day of the LORD'S sacrifice, that I will punish the princes, and the king's children, and all such as are clothed with strange apparel.

Zephaniah adds three details that will be important to our parable.

1. He describes the invitation, “he hath bid his guests,” literally, “sanctified his called ones.”
2. But there is punishment for princes.
3. There is also punishment for those who are not dressed appropriately.

**3 And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come.**--We can clearly see the parallels with the second parable. Again, the servants, representing the prophets, reach out repeatedly to the intended guests, the Jewish people.

Zephaniah prophesied that the Lord would “bid his guests.” So the king sends his servants to “call” them who were “bidden.” These verbs both translate the same Greek word *καλεω* (Strong 2564), meaning “to call, to invite.” They had been invited previously. Why was the subsequent invitation needed? Had they forgotten? Were they slow in coming?

**4 Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage.**--At this point, we hear the echoes of another OT passage, this time in Proverbs. Solomon tells a parable about two women who prepare feasts and invite people to come. In both cases they are said to “call” their guests, using forms of the same verb that our Lord uses to describe the invitation of the guests.<sup>9</sup>

One of the women personifies wisdom:

Pro 9:1 Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars: 2 She hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath also furnished her table. 3 She hath sent forth her maidens: she **crieth** **קרא** **συγκαλεω** upon the highest places of the city, 4 Whoso *is* simple, let him turn in hither: *as for* him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, 5 Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine *which* I have mingled.

The other embodies folly:

Pro 9:13 A foolish woman *is* clamorous: *she is* simple, and knoweth nothing. 14 For she sitteth at the door of her house, on a seat in the high places of the city, 15 To **call** **קרא** **προσκαλεω** passengers who go right on their ways: 16 Whoso *is* simple, let him turn in hither: and *as for* him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, 17 Stolen waters are sweet, and bread *eaten* in secret is pleasant. 18 But he knoweth not that the dead *are* there; and *that* her guests *are* in the depths of hell.

Earlier, Solomon has contrasted Wisdom (personified again as a woman) with a harlot, luring people to enjoy forbidden pleasures.

Pro 7:4 Say unto wisdom, Thou *art* my sister; and call understanding *thy* kinswoman: 5 That they may keep thee from the strange woman, from the stranger *which* flattereth with her words. 6 For at the window of my house I looked through my casement, 7 And beheld among the simple ones, I discerned among the youths, a young man void of understanding, 8 Passing through the street near her corner; and he went the way to her house, ... 10 And, behold, there met him a woman *with* the attire of an harlot, and subtil of heart.

In Matthew, Lady Wisdom becomes the king, and her rich table is a wedding feast. But Lady Folly is hosting another banquet, celebrating not marriage but harlotry. The implication is that those who refuse the invitation to Lady Wisdom’s banquet are distracted by that of Lady Folly.

**5 But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: 6 And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them.**--Again, the servants are repeatedly rejected, even violently. The violence of this action seems unrealistic, until we reflect that the marriage of the king’s son would be an important

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<sup>9</sup> The verb is קרא in both 9:3 and 9:15, and its usual LXX translation is καλεω, mostly *simpliciter*, but sometimes with prepositional prefixes, as here (συν- in 9:3, suggesting the assembling of a group; προσ- in 9:15, appropriate for summoning an individual, as for a tryst).



diplomatic event,<sup>10</sup> part of the succession from one royal generation to the next. As we see in the next verse, these people come from a different city. By inviting them to the feast, the king is asking them to endorse his continuing dynasty. By refusing to come, they are declaring their independence of him.

In the present context, the interpretation is straightforward. Remember from v. 1 that the feast represents the kingdom of heaven. These first verses recall the history of the invitation to the Jewish nation. Throughout the OT, the Lord taught Israel the basic principles of his kingdom. They had an early invitation to enter into it, and were given many clear signs when it should arrive—so much so that in the first century, there were those like Simeon, “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25), or Anna, who “spake ... to all them that looked for redemption in Israel” (Luke 2:38), or Joseph of Arimathea, “who also himself waited for the kingdom of God” (Luke 2:51). Even the pagan wise men, knowing Daniel’s prophecies, recognized that the time was right for the arrival of “the king of the Jews.” During his earthly ministry, the Lord’s focus was on “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” He told his disciples to go only to these (10:6) and he rebuffed the Canaanite woman on the same grounds (15:24).

But these were exceptions. The bulk of the nation rejected the prophets when they brought additional details of the invitation, just as we saw in the previous parable. Now, when the final invitation arrives, announcing that the kingdom of God is at hand, their leaders spurn the king’s son, who will rule over the kingdom. Their behavior is parallel to that of the husbandmen in the previous parable.

**7 But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.**--As with the husbandmen in 21:41, he destroys the offenders, but goes one step further by destroying their city. The Lord is picking up on Zephaniah’s warning that at the time of the great feast, God will “punish the princes,” those who do not submit to his rule.

Again the interpretation is straightforward, and parallel to that of the previous parable. Like the husbandmen, they are destroyed. This parable goes even further: their city is burned, anticipating what would happen to Jerusalem under the Romans in AD 70.

**8 Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. 9 Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage.**--In keeping with the imagery in Proverbs, both women advertise their feasts widely, and invite “whosoever will” to come and partake. Again, we have the verb “to call” being both “bidden” and “bid.”

**10 So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.**--Those who replace the invited guests are “both bad and good.” We’ve seen the bad before, in the publicans and harlots of 21:31-32. But there is room for reputable people as well, if they will only come.

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<sup>10</sup> Bauckham, JBL 115 (1996), 471-488

The command to the servants anticipates the mission on which the Lord Jesus sends his disciples at the end of this book: “Go ye therefore and teach all nations” (28:20). And this is now our responsibility. As his servants in this present age, we must “go into the highways, and as many as [we] shall find, bid (call, invite) to the marriage.” This is the general gospel burden that preoccupied the early church, and that is to be our mission until the Lord returns.

**11 And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment:**--This detail represents a new feature, not seen in the previous two parables. There, we had two groups of people: one (the son who did not go, the husbandmen) representing the Jewish elite, and another (the son who did go, the new nation) representing those who follow the Lord. But here, the guests who come to the dinner (those who follow the Lord) are further distinguished. One among them turns out to be false, and is excluded. Two details invite our attention: what is this third category of person, and what is the meaning of the wedding garment?

Let’s start by discussing the meaning of the detail, which recalls Zechariah’s prophecy,

Zep 1:8 And it shall come to pass in the day of the LORD'S sacrifice, that I will punish the princes, and the king's children, and **all such as are clothed with strange apparel.**

Zephaniah was written during the reign of Josiah (1:1), whose father Amon and grandfather Manasseh were given over to idolatry. Though Josiah turned to the Lord, many of his siblings probably did not. Zephaniah’s “strange” or “foreign” apparel likely describes garments associated with pagan worship. “The king’s children” look like part of the family, but their sympathies are with idols, and the Lord will remove these unbelievers from the banquet.

The NT counterpart is a false professor in the church. Already in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord warned of “false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves” (7:15). The first two parables distinguish those who directly oppose the Lord (the disobedient sun, the husbandmen) from others, but the third shows that it is not enough not to reject the Lord outright. Even those who associate with him may be lacking the garment.

And what is the garment? Many commentators state without documentation that the wedding garment was something provided by the host, and assume that it represents the imputed righteousness of the Lord Jesus.<sup>11</sup> But there is no historical evidence that the host at a wedding feast gave garments to the guests. Contemporary references to appropriate attire for a wedding<sup>12</sup> simply indicate that people were to wear their best clean clothing, presumably out of respect for the occasion. It would be disrespectful to wear old or dirty clothing, or garments appropriate for mourning, for example, just as in Zephaniah it is inappropriate to wear foreign garments suggesting pagan worship to the Lord’s banquet.

Later NT references to spiritual clothing suggest that the garment represents both a person’s initial salvation, and the practical righteousness that the Spirit enables his people to manifest.

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<sup>11</sup> France claims that the notion that the garment was given to the guests by the host goes back to Augustine, but the only discussion of the text in Augustine that I’ve been able to find is Sermon 45 on the NT, paragraph 7, where he says that the garment is love and exhorts his hearers to “put it on.”

<sup>12</sup> See France for references.

Matthew 21:18-23:39

Commands	8 But now ye also <b>put off</b> all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. 9 Lie not one to another,	12 <b>Put on</b> therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; 13 Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also <i>do</i> ye. 14 And above all these things <i>put on</i> charity, which is the bond of perfectness.
Statements	seeing that <b>ye have put off</b> the old man with his deeds;	10 And <b>have put on</b> the new <i>man</i> , which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: 11 Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond <i>nor</i> free: but Christ <i>is</i> all, and in all.

Table 6: Righteousness as clothing in Colossians 3

Two passages merit our attention.

In Colossians 3 (Table 6, chart), Paul repeatedly uses the verbs “put off” and “put on,” which specifically describe what one does with clothing. The passage is a chiasm, starting and ending with commands, but with statements in the middle. The passage is a paradox: we have already put off Christ and put on the new man when we were saved, but we are commanded to put off sin and put on righteousness in our daily life.

Revelation 19 specifically mentions wedding garments in describing the army of saints that accompanies the Lord back to earth (chart):

Rev 19:7 Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. 8 And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in **fine linen, clean and white**: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. 9 And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed *are* they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. ... 14 And the armies *which were* in heaven followed him upon white horses, **clothed in fine linen, white and clean**.

Verse 8 captures a paradox that reflects the one in Colossians 3. It says that “to her was granted that she should be arrayed.” The ability to wear these garments is a gift from God. And elsewhere in Revelation, we do read of white garments being a gift of God’s redemption:

Rev 3:18 I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and **white raiment**, that thou mayest be clothed, and *that* the shame of thy nakedness do not appear;

Rev 7:9 After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, ... clothed with **white robes**, and palms in their hands; ... 13 And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in **white robes**? and whence came they? 14 And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them **white** in the blood of the Lamb.

Yet the word “righteousness” in v. 8 is δικαιομα, literally “righteous deeds.” And again, the

## Matthew 21:18-23:39

Revelation often describes white garments as the result of righteous conduct. They are given to believers who overcome temptation in Sardis:

Rev 3:4 Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in **white**: for they are worthy. 5 He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment;

They also describe those who are faithful unto death:

Rev 6:9 And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: ... 11 And **white robes** were given unto every one of them;

But they are also sometimes described as something given by Christ:

So the picture is the same as in Colossians: the white garments are the practical righteousness in the lives of believers, which is made possible by God's gracious gift of free salvation.

Putting these results together, the guest without a garment is a false professor in the church who is revealed by the lack of righteousness in his life. The parable thus repeats what the Lord taught about false prophets in the Sermon on the Mount (chart):

Mat 7:15 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. 16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? 17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither *can* a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. 19 Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. 20 Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. 21 Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

Once again, we see the shadow of the fig tree. Simply being in the church doesn't save somebody. True inclusion depends on giving evidence of our salvation.

**12 And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. 13 Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**--In the world, the wheat and tares grow together until the last judgment. But in the church, the earthly manifestation of the kingdom, discipline is to be exercised to deal with those whose lives do not show evidence of true salvation.

**14 For many are called, but few are chosen.**--The Lord has used "call" *καλεω* throughout the parable in the sense of "invite," to speak of evangelistic outreach. The verb is also central in the OT prophecies on which he draws, Zep 1:7 and Prov 9. This is the verb translated "bidden" in 22:3, 4, 8, and "bid" in 22:9. It's the verb he uses in 9:13, "for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." We are to invite as many as possible, but a positive response by a prospect does not guarantee that they are born again. Only those whom God has

chosen will in fact be saved, and they will show it by their garments.

### **22:15-40 The Pharisees Attack**

**15 Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel**—This is the second time that we hear of the Pharisees' taking counsel. The first was in 12:14, seeking to destroy the Lord, after he healed a man on the Sabbath.

**how they might entangle him in his talk.**--Here their purpose is to entrap him, to get him to say something that will destroy him. In 12:14 they challenged him with a theological question (“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath days?”), and now they continue this tactic with three questions.<sup>13</sup> In each case the Lord answers them, and in each case he grounds his response on the OT.

### **22:16-22 Question about Tribute**

**16 And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians,**--We know little about this group. Clearly, they are sympathetic with the dynasty of Herod. It's possible that they were supporters of Rome (on whose authority the Herodians depended), but also that they opposed Rome (which had removed Judaea from Herodian control in AD 6 and replaced it with direct Roman control). But in either case, their orientation is political rather than theological (as in the case of the Sadducees), leading to a question that they hope will get the Lord in trouble with either the people (if he favors Rome) or the Romans (if he opposes Rome).

**saying, Master,**--The Greek word, διδασκαλος, means “teacher,” and is a common translation<sup>14</sup> for the Jewish title “Rabbi” (chart):

Joh 1:38 Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye?  
They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master διδασκαλος,) where dwellest thou?

This title introduces all three of the questions in this section, and we will see that it reflects a deliberate strategy by the Pharisees.

In Matthew the only people to address the Lord in this way are outside the circle of his disciples.<sup>15</sup> The title used by his disciples is “Lord,” indicating his authority over their actions. What matters is not just attention to the words of Jesus as a heaven-sent teacher, but our obedience to him as Lord.

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13 It is tempting, but probably a too much of a stretch, to seek to link these with the three choices of Deut 6:5 and 1 John 2:16: tribute → lust of eyes, resurrection (in the context of marriage) → lust of flesh, commandments → pride of life.

14 A wide range of minority mss use διδασκαλος to translate Rabbi also in Matt 23:8, but the majority use the less common word for teacher, καθηγητης. The latter is in the original of  $\aleph$ , but a corrector has put διδασκαλος. While we should follow the MT in Matt 23:8, the confusion shows the common use of διδασκαλος as a Greek equivalent for רבי.

15 The term is sometimes spoken by the Lord of himself in a non-vocative case: 10:24, 25; 26:18.

They proceed to address him with the kind of praise we would expect faithful students to address to their Rabbi:

**we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth,**--These statements, while true, ring hollow on the lips of people who have already plotted his destruction, and the Lord calls them on this in v. 18.

**neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men.**--This statement is central to understanding what follows,<sup>16</sup> so we should spend some time understanding it.

The Jews express the same idea in two phrases: the Lord isn't afraid of what people think. He will speak his mind whether it offends someone or not. They pose this as a complement to his integrity, but of course they are daring him to say something that will offend the authorities, and thus get himself in trouble.

The second expression is literally “you do not look at the face of men” (chart) It is a translation of the Hebrew expression נָסָא פָּנִים, literally “lift up the face,” which appears 24 times in the OT, mostly as an idiom meaning to accept somebody, to respond to them based on who they are.<sup>17</sup> One can imagine the decision-maker “lifting up the face” of the other person to see who they are, and acting accordingly.

Given the meaning of the idiom, the verb used by the Pharisees, βλέπω εἰς “look at,” is reasonable, but it is never used in the LXX. The most common verb there is θαυμάζω, to show wonder or awe in the presence of somebody. The word chosen by the Pharisees opens the door for the Lord to make an interesting point.

We come now to the first question. We saw a common theme in the three parables—the demand for fruit in one's life, corresponding to our profession. As we work through the questions, we should be on the lookout for some common theme here as well. The Lord is in control of this conversation, and he arranges his answers to form a coherent statement.

**17 Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?**--The question, “Is it lawful,” is a standard question that disciples put to their rabbi. This is the third time the Pharisees have put such a question to the Lord:

Mat 12:10 And, behold, there was a man which had *his* hand withered. And they asked him, saying, **Is it lawful** to heal on the sabbath days? that they might accuse him.

Mat 19:3 The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, **Is it lawful** for a man to put away his wife for every cause?

A major part of the work of a rabbi is answering such questions, and Jewish tradition collects these answers, or Responsa, for later reference. So formally, the Pharisees are acting as though they respect the Lord as their rabbi.

The specific question concerns a particular kind of tax, the poll tax κηνσος connected with the

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16 I'm indebted here and for the ref to Eccl 8:2 to Derrett.

17 See notes. Sometimes (2 Sam 2:22; 2 Kings 9:32)

Matthew 21:18-23:39

Roman census. There were taxes that the Herods collected on behalf of Rome, but this is different. It is a tax paid directly to Rome. The question of its legality turns on the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17,

Deu 17:15 *one* from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which *is* not thy brother.

The Herodian arrangement preserved at least the appearance that their king was Jewish,<sup>18</sup> whatever his geopolitical connections might be. But paying a tax directly to Rome ran the risk of violating this fundamental command.

**18 But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites?**--This is the third time (after 15:7 and 16:3) that the Lord has used this word to describe the scribes and Pharisees. He used it four times (6:2, 5, 16; 7:5) in the Sermon on the Mount to describe those who are not in the kingdom, and it will play an important role in ch. 23. It means, literally, an actor on the stage. Those who examine him are pretending what they are not. By addressing him as a rabbi, they are pretending to be his disciples. He recognizes their deceitfulness, and in what follows, he responds to their unctuous words about his refusal to “look at the face of man.” His argument turns precisely on “looking at the face of man.”

**19 Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny.**--He asks to see the coin with which they pay is the denarius, which had an image of Tiberias on it (Figure 3, chart).

**20 And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription?**--They have hypocritically complemented him on “not looking at the face of a man.” Now he looks at the coin (“shew me”), and calls their attention to the face that it bears.

**21 They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.**--The usual understanding of this verse is that some things are owed to Caesar, and other, different things to God. But the relation is much more subtle.



Figure 3: Denarius of Tiberius Caesar, ruled AD 14-37

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emperor\\_Tiberius\\_Denarius\\_-\\_Tribute\\_Penny.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emperor_Tiberius_Denarius_-_Tribute_Penny.jpg)

The Lord bases his response on an OT text (chart),

Ecc 8:1 Who *is* as the wise *man*? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? a man's wisdom maketh his **face** to shine, and the boldness of his **face** shall be changed. 2 I *counsel thee* to keep the king's commandment [carefully watch the king's **mouth**], and *that* in regard of the oath of God. 3 Be not hasty to go out of his **sight** [**face**]: stand not in an evil thing; for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him.

The text involves the “face,” and it is the face of Caesar to which the Lord has appealed.

In expressions elsewhere in the OT, the “oath of God” refers to an oath taken in the name of

<sup>18</sup> In fact, the Herodians were Edomite, not Israelite, but they managed to pass themselves off as Jewish.

Matthew 21:18-23:39

God:<sup>19</sup> consider the resolution of an accusation of theft,

Exo 22:11 *Then* shall an oath of the LORD be between them both, that he hath not put his hand unto his neighbour's goods;

Or Solomon's words to Shimei after he broke his vow to stay in Jerusalem:

1Ki 2:43 Why then hast thou not kept the oath of the LORD, and the commandment that I have charged thee with?

How did Judea come under direct Roman rule? After the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, his son Archelaus ruled until AD 6, but with such corruption that his own people appealed to Caesar to remove him:

Jwr 2:111 And now Archelaus took possession of his government, and used not the Jews only, but the Samaritans also, barbarously; and this out of his resentment of their old quarrels with him. Whereupon, they both of them sent ambassadors against him to Caesar; and in the ninth year of his government, he was banished to Vienna, a city of Gaul, and his effects were put into Caesar's treasury. ... 117 And now Archelaus' part of Judea was reduced into a province, and Coponius, one of the equestrian order among the Romans, was sent as a procurator, having the power of [life and] death put into his hands by Caesar. [also Ant 17:342-354]

So the Roman rule in Judea was not imposed by direct conquest, but was the result of a popular request on the part of the people, which they no doubt substantiated by oaths in the name of the Lord.<sup>20</sup> They have put themselves under Caesar's authority, and so must now respect his laws, "and that in regard of the oath of God" that they have sworn.

The situation in Jerusalem in AD 33 was a specific historical situation, but the point is a more general one. The Lord is not drawing a contrast between what we owe to Caesar and what we owe to God. He is saying that in giving Caesar what is Caesar's, we are in fact giving God what is God's. We are not under two parallel but independent duties, one to God and one to Caesar. They are directly connected.

**22 When they had heard these words, they marvelled,**--We observed at the outset that their flattering expression, "Thou regardest not the person of men" (v. 16), is based on a Hebrew idiom גִּישָׁא פְּנִים, meaning to give someone special respect. But it is not the usual Greek translation of this idiom. They said, literally, "you do not look at βλέπω εις the face of men," but the most common Greek translation is, "you do not marvel θαυμάζω at the face." And in fact, the most common LXX use of the verb "to marvel" is in this expression. The Lord has rebuked their hypocritical flattery by forcing them to look at the face of Caesar. Now they cannot help but give him special respect. He compels their honor, in spite of themselves.

Matthew is fond of this verb. For the most part, others marvel at the Lord (Table 7, chart):

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19 But Derrett thinks it's the covenant bond between the Lord and the people at Sinai (Jer 11:1-8), and Ogden and Zogbo (UBS Handbook on Eccl.) think it's the oath that God made to the Davidic king (Psa 89:19-21).

20 Gen 31:51-53 illustrates the propensity of parties to a treaty to swear in the name of the deity they recognize.



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- The disciples marvel at his authority over the created world, when he calms the sea (8:27) and later withers the fig tree (21:10).
- The multitudes marvel at his healings (9:8, 33; 15:31).
- The last ones to marvel are his adversaries, here and 27:14 (the governor). What leads them to marvel is his speech, or lack thereof.

Who?	Where?	At what?
Disciples	8:27; 21:10	His power over creation
Multitudes	9:8, 33; 15:31	Healings
Adversaries	22:22; 27:14	His speech or silence
The Lord	8:10	Faith of a Gentile
	Mark 6:6	Unbelief of the Jews

Table 7: Who marvels in Matthew?

Thus far, the examples emphasize that in spite of themselves, everybody must ultimately recognize that Jesus is somebody special. Every knee shall bow, even those of his enemies, and every tongue will confess that he is Lord.

But the very first use of the verb in Matthew has the Lord as subject. He marvels at the faith of the centurion (8:10), a Gentile who had no reason to expect such miracles. The only other thing in the gospels that stimulates marvel in our Lord is the unbelief of the Jews of Nazareth:

Mar 6:6 And he marvelled because of their unbelief.

The idea that our Lord would marvel should give us pause. We recognize his deity, and God is omniscient. However, in his humanity, our Lord's knowledge was limited. In Gethsemane, he was uncertain about the outcome of the sacrifice he was about to make, and in Mark 13:32 he declares himself excluded from the Father's knowledge of the day and hour of his return.

So here he is surprised that a Gentile believes and that the Jews do not. Our Lord was "not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24), and charged his disciples to limit their outreach to this group (10:6). He knows the mission he has received from his Father, and is surprised when his own people reject him and the Gentiles show interest.

**and left him, and went their way.**--They left the little group gathered around the Lord, but in fact the Pharisees at least must have remained in the area, for they regather in v. 34.

## 22:23-33 Question about the Resurrection

**23 The same day came to him the Sadducees, which say that there is no resurrection,**-- Accepted only the five books of Moses as authoritative, and as a result, de-emphasized the resurrection, which is most clearly taught elsewhere in the OT (chart):

Act 23:8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.

**and asked him, 24 Saying, Master, Moses said, If a man die, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother.**--The legislation is in Deut 25 (chart),

Deu 25:5 If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of

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the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her. 6 And it shall be, *that* the firstborn which she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother *which is* dead, that his name be not put out of Israel.

This legislation presumes that people die, which is not the case in the resurrection.

**25 Now there were with us seven brethren: and the first, when he had married a wife, deceased, and, having no issue, left his wife unto his brother: 26 Likewise the second also, and the third, unto the seventh. 27 And last of all the woman died also. 28 Therefore in the resurrection whose wife shall she be of the seven? for they all had her.**--This appears to be a stock question of the Sadducees to show the logical incoherence of the notion of resurrection.

**29 Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God.**--This verse is a chiasmic summary of what follows (Table 8, chart).

29 ... not knowing the scriptures,	31 But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, 32 I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?
Nor the power of God.	30 for in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.

*Table 8: Matt 22:29 as Chiasmic Summary*

**30 For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.**--His first point deals with the power of God. The Sadducees presume that people in heaven have need of the same institutions that they do on earth, and in particular, of marriage to raise up offspring and thus preserve the race beyond the death of any individual. The law of levirate marriage is based on just this need. But God is able to sustain those whom he raises without any need of procreation, and thus of the marriage relation.

**31 But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, 32 I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?**--His second point, about knowing the scriptures, is based on what God said to Moses in Exod 3:6, at the burning bush.

**God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.**--The argument turns on the present tense of the verb εἰμι. The patriarchs died hundreds of years before God met Moses at the bush, yet he still describes himself as their God, pointing to their continued existence and relation to God.

**33 And when the multitude heard this, they were astonished ἐκπλησσω at his doctrine.** --As in v. 22, the Lord's answer brings amazement, though the term here (ἐκπλησσω, literally "to knock out") is much stronger than that (θαυμάζω) in v. 22. But the ones who are amazed are the multitudes. According to the next verse, the Sadducees are simply silenced.

**22:34-40 Question about the Great Commandment**

In the first question, the Lord connected our duty to Caesar with our duty to God. In the second, he expounds marriage in the light of the nature of God: his power changes the terms of engagement, so that in the resurrection, we no longer face paradoxes that would encumber us on earth. Both questions emphasize the relation between our duty to God and our duty to our fellow humans. The Lord’s answer to the third question unifies and summarizes this insight.

**34 But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together.**--They dispersed in v. 22, but no doubt some lingered on the edge of the crowd. In his first answer, he refused the nationalist position, but his response to the Sadducees suggests that he might be sympathetic to the Pharisees. Like Nicodemus in John 3 after the Lord threw out the Sadducees’ concessions from the temple, they come back to explore further.

**35 Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him,**--As in v. 18, they are still examining him.

**and saying, 36 Master, which is the great commandment in the law?**--The Jewish sages delighted in seeking to distinguish the importance of various commandments; see Gill for references. But we should recall what the Lord said in the Sermon on the Mount (chart),

Mat 5:19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach *them*, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

The Jews focused on figuring out what was really important and what they could ignore, but the Lord reminds them that all is important.

**37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. 38 This is the first and great commandment.**--He begins with Deut 6:5, the Shema.

Deu 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God *is* one LORD: 5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might [muchness, abundance].

The devout Jew recites this command twice a day. It is reflected throughout Matthew (Table 9). In parable of the soils in ch. 13, each of the fruitless soils is defective in one of the three conditions of this

Deut 6:5	Soils, Matt 13	Going to Jer., Matt 19-20
All thine heart	19 Wayside: sown in the heart	19:13-15, Humility of a little child
All thy soul/life	21 Stony: offended by persecution & tribulation	19:3-12, Divorce
All thy muchness	22 Thorns: care of this world, deceitfulness of riches	19:16-20:15, Riches

*Table 9: The Shema in Matthew*

command. It determines the structure of the three conversations that the Lord had on the way to

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Jerusalem in ch. 19-20.<sup>21</sup> The Pharisees could hardly have been surprised at this response, though it is much more general than the injunctions (such as keeping the Sabbath, or circumcision, or the use of phylacteries) whose importance they usually debated.

This command recalls the first four commandments (no other gods, no idols, no blasphemy, Sabbath day), which address our relation to God.

**39 And the second is like unto it,**--The lawyer only asked for the great commandment, but the Lord insists that he must not neglect the second. In view of the Lord's initiative, we should understand the particle "like unto" *ομοιος* to emphasize not just superficial similarity, but equal weight or importance. The particle is sometimes used of two armies of comparable strength.<sup>22</sup>

**Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.**--This summary is particularly appropriate to the last six commandments (honor parents, murder, adultery, theft, false witness, coveting). The Lord is quoting Leviticus:

Lev 19:18 Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.

The Lord's insistence on bringing up the second commandment recalls a conversation he had on the way to Jerusalem, which started with the second commandment and worked back to the first (chart). An inquirer asked which commandments he should keep to gain eternal life:

Mat 19:16 And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? 17 And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? *there is none good but one, that is, God:* but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. 18 He saith unto him, Which?

His question, "Which?", echoes the challenge of the lawyer in 22:35 to identify "the great commandment in the law." In the case of the young man, the Lord starts with Lev 19:18.

Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, 19 Honour thy father and *thy* mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 20 The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?

This time, it is his questioner who recognizes that something is missing., and the Lord puts his finger on his failure to love the Lord his God "with all his abundance":

21 Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go *and* sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come *and* follow me. 22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.

In insisting on the importance of Lev 19:18, the Lord reflects a widespread Jewish persuasion in

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21 It also lies behind several other texts, ultimately 1 John 2:16: <http://www.cyber-chapel.org/ThreeChoices.pdf>

22 Josephus *Ant.* 8:364 because Ahab's army was not **like** that of Benhadad, he did not set it in array to fight him; Rev 13:4 Who *is like* unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?

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the first century that this verse is the best single summary of the law.<sup>23</sup> The Babylonian Talmud records a story about Shammai (50 BC – AD 30) and Hillel (110 BC – AD 10), the two rival rabbis at the turn of the era (chart).

On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.' Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, 'What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.' (B. Shabbat 31a)

The Jerusalem Talmud quotes Rabbi Akiba (AD 40-137), the leading rabbi of the age:

Rabbi Akiba taught: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus, 19) This is the most important rule in the Torah." (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 30B)

These examples may explain why Paul, trained as a rabbi, picks up this summary:

Rom 13:9 For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

Gal 5:14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

And James takes a similar position:

Jam 2:8 If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well:

There is something curious about the position of Hillel and Akiba, echoed by Paul and James. They are willing to summarize the law as requiring the love of other people, without mentioning our love toward God.

Commentators on Paul sometimes assert<sup>24</sup> that he focuses on Lev 19:18 because he is discussing human relations. This approach might work in Rom 13:9, but in Galatians the context is circumcision, which his Judaizing adversaries would surely have considered a duty owed to God. In addition, Hillel and Akiba would certainly not overlook the first four commandments, and Paul's limited citation follows that Pharisaic tradition. How are we to explain the distinction?

The best solution I can find is that Paul cites only the love of man, not because it is *superior* to the love of God, but because it is *evidence* that we love God.<sup>25</sup> John articulates this insight:

23 Dunn on Gal 5:14 claims that this is the OT text most often cited in the NT. Archer and Chirichigno give 8 citations, only 5 for Psa 110:1 (but two more are 1 Cor 15:25 and Eph 1:20).

24 John Brown of Edinburgh on Gal 5:14; Morris on Rom 13:9.

25 Thus Calvin: "For this reason love is called the perfection of the law (not only here, but also in Rom. 13:8): not because it is better than the worship of God, but because it is the convincing evidence of it." George: "Why did Paul call the selfless love of neighbor the fulfilling of the whole law? Not because it is superior to the worship

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1Jo 4:7 Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. 8 He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. ... 20 If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?

The spirit of brotherhood that people so intensely seek today is accessible only by the power of God’s Spirit. The natural man cannot truly love his neighbor. Only those who have repented of their sin and received Jesus as their Lord and Savior, that is, those who have truly loved God, can love their neighbor.

This observation in turn may account for the Lord’s insistence on adding Lev 19:18 to his citation of Deut 6:5. If one wants the great commandment, surely loving God has to come at the top, but it is incomplete by itself. It must lead to the love of our neighbor, and that love in turn can only come from one who first knows God. As in the first two questions, our relation to God enables our relation with other people.

There are intriguing parallels between Matthew and John’s gospel. We have seen that our Lord’s teaching about the little ones in Matthew 18 aligns with what he tells Nicodemus about the need to be born again. Here is another example: he is focusing our attention on the need to love one another, which in John 13:34 is the new commandment that he gives his disciples.

**40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.--**

This answer, unlike the other two, does not provoke amazement. Why not?

His answer agrees with what a lawyer had told him six months earlier, during the Lord’s journey to Jerusalem for the feast of tabernacles (Table 10, chart).

So the Lord’s response here is the least contentious of the three, and in fact his answer to this question, unlike the answers to the previous two, does not surprise his hearers.

Tabernacles, AD 32	Passover, AD 33
Luk 10:25 And, behold, a certain <b>lawyer</b> stood up, and tempted him, saying, <b>Master</b> , what shall I do to inherit eternal life?	Mat 22:35 Then one of them, <i>which was a lawyer</i> , asked <i>him a question</i> , tempting him, and saying, 36 <b>Master</b> ,
26 He said unto him, What is written <b>in the law</b> ? how readest thou?	<i>which is the great commandment in the law?</i>
27 And he answering said, Thou shalt <b>love the Lord thy God</b> with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind;	37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the <b>Lord thy God</b> with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. 38 This is the first and great commandment.
<b>and thy neighbour as thyself.</b>	39 And the second <i>is</i> like unto it, Thou shalt <b>love thy neighbour as thyself.</b>
28 And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.	40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

*Table 10: An Earlier Conversation about the Law*

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and adoration of God, but rather because it is the proof of it.” Meyer’s comments tend in the same vein, citing 1 John 4:20.

## 22:41-46, The Lord Responds with a Question

**41 While the Pharisees were gathered together,**--The last question did not offend them, and we can imagine them stroking their beards in agreement, when he poses a question back to them. Like the first question that he posed the chief priests in 22:25, they are unable to answer it.

**Jesus asked them, 42 Saying, What think ye of Christ?**--Better, “the Christ,” that is, the Messiah. He is not asking what they think of him, but what they think of the Messiah in general.

**whose son is he? They say unto him, The Son of David.**--They answer with the title that the multitudes gave to the Lord at his triumphal entry (21:9), the title with which Matthew opens his gospel (1:1). If questioned, they would no doubt point to texts such as 2 Sam 7 and Psa 89 (chart).

2Sa 7:12 And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up **thy seed** after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever.

Psa 89:29 **His [David’s] seed** also will I make *to endure* for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven.

But those same texts, as well as Psa 2, suggest another answer. God promises that David’s son will be properly called the Son of God:

2Sa 7:14 I will be his father, and he shall be my son.

Psa 2:7 I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou *art* my Son; this day have I begotten thee.

Psa 89:26 He shall cry unto me, Thou *art* my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation. 27 Also I will make him *my* firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth.<sup>26</sup>

**43 He saith unto them, How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, 44 The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool?**--The quotation from Psa 110 (chart) is written by David, so “my Lord” refers to David’s Lord. But the Psalm was widely understood as Messianic (Edersheim). So the Lord is calling their attention to a Psalm they would recognize as Messianic in which David calls the Messiah “Lord.”

**45 If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?**--But this text elevates the Messiah higher than they had considered. It emphasizes the authority that he as Messiah has over them, and the wickedness of their rejection of him.

**46 And no man was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him any more questions.**--They are so stymied that they dare not engage him publicly.

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<sup>26</sup> Intriguingly, in Psa 89, the relation to God as father is assigned to David himself.

**Synthesis of the Interactions in the Great Debate**

Is this just a collection of stories and answers to questions, or is there some higher level unity? Table 11 (chart) shows some tantalizing commonalities across each group, and between the groups.

First, consider the themes within each category. The three *parables* he tells the chief priests all point to the need for obedience in our lives:

	<b>Parables</b>	<b>Answers</b>
Row Themes	Commandment	1. Two Sons (3. Great Commandment)
	Unpopular Payment	2. Wicked Tenants 1. Census Tax
	Marriage in the Kingdom	3. Marriage Feast 2. Widow of Seven
	Column Theme:	Fruit 3. Great Commandment God enables human interaction

Table 11: Unifying the Parables and the Questions

- Sons: work in the vineyard
- Tenants: he wants to receive the fruit
- Marriage supper: need for the marriage garment.

These three parables remind us of the lesson of the Fig Tree that the Lord expects fruit, and the unanswerable questions demonstrate his authority to demand that fruit.

His *answers* to the three questions from the Pharisees and Sadducees all deal with the relation between our obedience to God and our relation to other people.

- Tribute: keep the king’s commandment in view of the oath of God.
- Marriage: our relation to our most intimate partners is governed by the power of God.
- Two commandments: love God, and (as a result) love neighbor.

Is there a connection between these two? There is a similarity in the contexts of individual parables and answers.

- The father’s *command* to the two sons anticipates the Lord’s summary of the great command (and the second) in the law.
- The wicked tenants *owe* the fruit to the householder, just as the Jews owe the census tax to Caesar.
- The parable of the *marriage* feast as a picture of the *kingdom* of God anticipates the Sadducees’ question about marriage in the resurrection.

These connections suggest that the Lord intends us to connect the demand for fruit in the parables with the need for Spirit-powered care for other people in the answers. The fruit that is required is love of our fellow—the very thing the Jews are not demonstrating toward him (chart).



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Joh 7:19 Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law? Why go ye about to kill me?

The demand for love pervades the ethic of the NT:

Joh 13:34 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

Gal 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, 23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

1Co 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become *as* sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. 2 And though I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

This last passage is particularly important. Fruit is not just action that conforms to the Scripture. It is action motivated by love—love for God that leads to love for one another.

### **23:1-12, Instructing the Disciples about Humility**

We are now working our way out of the chiasm. The first twelve verses of ch. 23, like 21:20-22, are addressed to his disciples. There, he taught them about faith. Here, the lesson is humility.

**23:1 Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, 2 Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit<sup>27</sup> in Moses' seat:**--We need to remember, in the words of Mark Powell, that Matthew describes “a world where most people are illiterate and copies of the Torah are not plentiful. Since Jesus’ disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will be dependent on the scribes and the Pharisees to know what Moses said.” These religious leaders are custodians of the Holy Scripture, something that Paul acknowledges (chart):

Rom 3:1 What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit *is there* of circumcision? 2 Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.

They “sit in Moses’ seat,” as his representatives to their generation. And in fact, they know the OT very well. They frequently quote it,<sup>28</sup> and the Lord never condemns the accuracy of their citation, only their understanding of the implications.

**3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do;**--There is a variant

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27 It is common to assert that the aorist conveys the sense of “they sat themselves,” usurping a position not properly theirs (e.g., Luz, France, Carson, Morris). But the understanding of v. 3 based on the MT as a serious command makes it more likely that the aorist is gnomic, as also realized by Powell, *JBL* 114/3 (1995) 419-35, followed by Nolland.

28 Compare 2:4-6 with Mic 5:1-3; 19:7 with Deut 24:1-4; 22:24 with Deut 25:5; 22:42 with 2 Sam 7; 27:6 with Deut 23:18.

Matthew 21:18-23:39

reading at this text that has led to considerable confusion. It is important for us to understand what the text does and does not say.

The two oldest manuscripts leave out the first instance of the verb “observe,” leading to the command, “All therefore whatsoever they bid you, observe and do.” This command would be very puzzling, given the Lord’s regular opposition to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees (chart). In ch. 15, he rejected their tradition about washing hands and avoiding the requirement to honor one’s parents.

Matt 15:6 Thus have ye made the commandment of God of **none effect** by your tradition.

Matt 15:14 **Let them alone:** they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.

Later, he warns the disciples more generically,

Matt 16:6 Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. ... 12 Then understood they how that he bade *them* not **beware** of the leaven of bread, but **of the doctrine** of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.

How can he now tell his disciples to do what they say?

But if we follow the vast multitude of mss (including some almost as old as the two at the base of the alternative reading), we come to a different conclusion. We are not to do what they say. But what they tell us to **observe**, we are to observe, and then go on to do. What does this mean?

Note the “therefore.” This instruction is based on what he has just said about the Pharisees’ role as guardians of what Moses taught. In that role, they would often call the attention of the people to passages in the law (such as the need to honor one’s parents). They would often go beyond that to cite (or construct) elaborate traditions to change the point of the law, but their starting place was the law. Very well, the Lord says, if they call your attention to a command in the law (if they “bid you observe” something having to do with “Moses’ seat”), you should observe it, and not only that, but you should do it (the command from the law).<sup>29</sup> He exhorts his followers to be like the Bereans:

Act 17:11 These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

The Bereans listened to Paul, considered the texts that he suggested to them, and then went back to those texts. That’s exactly how the Lord tells his followers to treat the teaching of the Pharisees. And it is how we should treat what we hear from other people about the Scriptures. We should be happy to have them direct our attention to one passage or another, but we must search out for ourselves whether what they say is so.

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<sup>29</sup> This interpretation follows naturally from careful attention to the majority text. Powell, *JBL* 114/3 (1995) 419-35 reaches a similar conclusion with great labor by other reasoning. He offers an excellent discussion of the background and previous work, but completely neglects the textual issues. See note for textual discussion.

**but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.**--Their citations of the Scriptures are accurate, but the actions they carry out and impose on others do not reflect the true intent of what they cite.

**4 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders;**--The Pharisees did not teach an empty faith. Quite the contrary, they defined many very practical details of how people should live, and emphasized the need to follow all 613 commandments in the law. But they did so in a way that oppressed the common people. A rabbinical scholar in a Yeshiva, supported financially by his parents and in-laws, could find intellectual stimulation in the nit-picking regulations derived by the scribes, but to the average Galilean farmer or fisherman, these were a burden. It is Peter, the unlearned fisherman, who speaks up at the Jerusalem conference when the Jewish faction of the church wants to impose the law on the new Gentile converts (chart):

Act 15:10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a **yoke** upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

**but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.**--The notion of “moving” the burdens probably refers, not to changing the teaching, but to bearing some of the load themselves. Contrast the ministry of our Lord, who carries our burden for us, following the image of a double yoke in which one ox helps another drag a load (Figure 4):

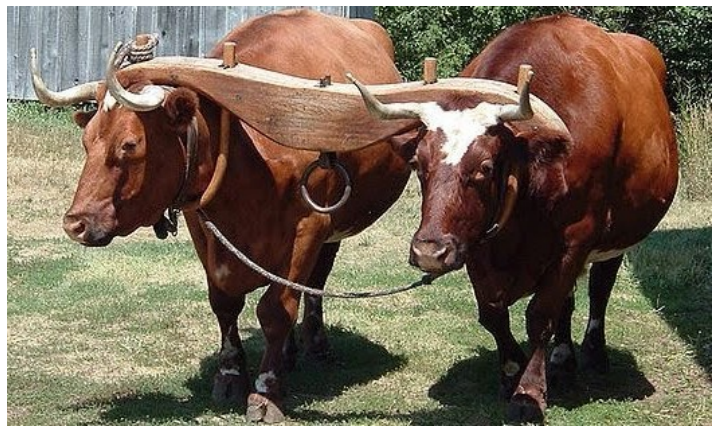


Figure 4: A double yoke [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-9lc5naQIESAT\\_KGGj1YL2I/AAAAAAAAASY/lhP2vHF3Ges/s1600/Yoke.JPG](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-9lc5naQIESAT_KGGj1YL2I/AAAAAAAAASY/lhP2vHF3Ges/s1600/Yoke.JPG) (flipped)

Mat 11:28 Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. 30 For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light.

This language about burdens and help in moving them reminds us that in our flesh we cannot obey God’s word. Obedience is only possible by the work of God’s Spirit:

Rom 8:4 That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

This is how the Lord moves our burdens—by providing us with his Spirit. And this the Pharisees were unable to do for their followers.

**5 But all their works they do for to be seen of men:**--This is their great error. In terms of 1 John 2:16, they are vulnerable to the pride of life; they do not love the Lord with all their heart.

**they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders [fringes, tassles] of their garments,--** These two items refer to two articles of Jewish devotion, based on OT texts (Figure 5, chart). The phylacteries were small leather boxes containing portions of Scripture, including the Shema, that are worn on the forehead and left arm during prayer, in a literal application of Deut 6:8,

Deu 6:8 And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.

The borders (or fringes or tassles) were commanded by God to be on all their garments, not just their prayer shawls:

Num 15:38 Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue:

Our Lord, as an observant Jew, had such tassles on his clothing:

Mat 9:20 And, behold, a woman, which was diseased with an issue of blood twelve years, came behind *him*, and touched the **hem** of his garment:

But the Pharisees “enlarge the fringes,” making them extra long to be sure that everybody sees them. The scribes and Pharisees were ostentatious in their observance of these commands.

**6 And love the uppermost rooms [places] at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.--** They want to be prominent, to have people offer them special respect. The culmination of this respect is the honored title, “Rabbi,” which means literally “my great one.”

The next three verses rule out such titles of respect among believers.

**8 But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master καθηγητης, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.**

**9 And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven.**

**10 Neither be ye called masters καθηγητης: for one is your Master, καθηγητης even Christ.**

The Lord is not speaking of function, but of honorary titles. In v. 34, he promises, “I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes.” So it is appropriate to *describe* someone as having such a function (chart):



Figure 5: Phylacteries and prayer shawls at the Western Wall <http://assets.messianicbible.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/1080-Jewish-men-wearing-tallits-and-tefillin-pray-at-the-Kotel-600x392.jpg>

Eph 4:11 And he gave some, **apostles**; and some, **prophets**; and some, **evangelists**; and some, **pastors** and **teachers**;

Paul even describes himself this way:

1Co 4:15-17 For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *have ye* not many **fathers**: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. ... 17 For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved **son**, and faithful in the Lord,

But nobody ever calls Paul, “Father Paul,” or Barnabas, “Pastor Barnabas.” We are not to seek or accept honorary titles. Some churches delight to call prominent brothers, “Pastor” or “Deacon” or “Elder” or “Bishop.” But our Lord instructs us not to use any title other than “brother.”

**11 But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant.**--He is repeating the lesson that was necessary back in ch. 20,

Mat 20:25 But Jesus called them *unto him*, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. 26 But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; 27 And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: 28 Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Thus far, he is exhorting them to how they should behave. But this is not just a matter for individual discipline. The Father will enforce these standards.

**12 And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.**--Hannah understood this:

1Sa 2:6 The LORD killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up. 7 The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up.

And Asaph also:

Psa 75:4 I said unto the fools, Deal not foolishly: and to the wicked, Lift not up the horn: 5 Lift not up your horn on high: speak *not with* a stiff neck. 6 For promotion *cometh* neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. 7 But God *is* the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another.

## **23:13-39, Woes to the Scribes and Pharisees**

### **Theme, Text, and Structure**

Before going through this section verse by verse, we should highlight three of its major *themes*, then comment on some *textual confusion*, and outline its overall *structure*.

**Theme**

There are three repeated words in this passage that characterize the scribes and Pharisees. Eight times the Lord declares woe upon them, five times the Lord calls them blind, and seven times he calls them hypocrites.

**Woes**

To understand the woes, we need to hear the echo of Isaiah and the other prophets. There, the woes are not simply mourning over disaster, but warnings of coming judgment. The full formula is Woe + statement of sin + consequence. Isaiah 5 shows that the woes and the judgments can be arranged in two ways. Each of Vv. 8 and 11 is followed by its own consequence, but then we have a string of woes, 18-22, which together are followed by a single consequence (Table 12, chart).

Given this pattern, we naturally look for the consequences in our text. Most of the woes don't have any. v. 14 does ("therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation"), and at the end of the entire section (34-39) we have an extended list of consequences. This distinction between woes and consequences will be important as we outline the structure of the section.

Woe	Consequence
8 <b>Woe</b> unto them that join house to house, <i>that</i> lay field to field, till <i>there be</i> no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!	9 In mine ears <i>said</i> the LORD of hosts, Of a truth many houses shall be desolate, <i>even</i> great and fair, without inhabitant. ...
11 <b>Woe</b> unto them that rise up early in the morning, <i>that</i> they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, <i>till</i> wine inflame them! ...	13 <b>Therefore</b> my people are gone into captivity, because <i>they have</i> no knowledge: and their honourable men <i>are</i> famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst. ...
18 <b>Woe</b> unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope: 19 That say, Let him make speed, <i>and</i> hasten his work, that we may see <i>it</i> : and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know <i>it</i> ! 20 <b>Woe</b> unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! 21 <b>Woe</b> unto <i>them that are</i> wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! 22 <b>Woe</b> unto <i>them that are</i> mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: 23 Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him!	24 <b>Therefore</b> as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. ...

Table 12: Woes and Consequences in Isaiah 5

### Hypocrites

This chapter is the central chapter in the entire Bible for the English word “hypocrite” (Figure 6, chart), and it’s worthwhile paying attention to it.

The Greek word means “stage actor,” someone who pretends to be what they are not. We naturally turn to the LXX to see how Jews of the first century would have understood this word. In the LXX, the word appears only twice, in Job 34:30; 36:13, both times translating **רָצָה**, which has the broader sense of being

ungodly or unlawful. But the specific instances of ungodliness that it describes are often associated with deceptive, insincere speech, and in NT times it was used very much in the sense that it has in the gospels.<sup>30</sup> This OT background is important in understanding the seriousness of the charge. The Hebrew word appears in Isaiah, linked to “villany” and “iniquity”:

Isa 32:6 For the vile person will speak villany, and his heart will work iniquity, to practise **hypocrisy**, and to utter error against the LORD, to make empty the soul of the hungry, and he will cause the drink of the thirsty to fail.

In ch. 15, our Lord quotes another text of Isaiah (which does not use the word) to define hypocrisy, emphasizing that the word implies wickedness, not just deception:

Mat 15:7 **Ye hypocrites**, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying [29:13], 8 This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with *their* lips; but their heart is far from me. 9 But in vain they do worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men.

And if we compare a later verse in Matthew with its parallel in Luke, we see that “hypocrite” overlaps with “unbeliever” (Table 13, chart). The word does not describe careless

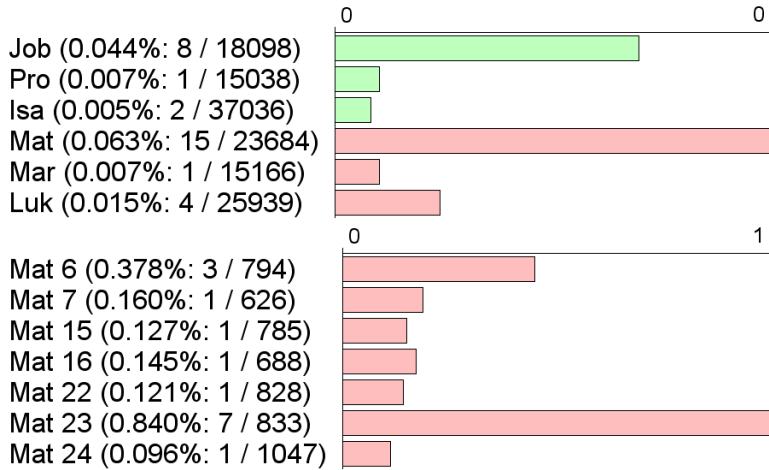


Figure 6: Distribution of "Hypocrite," "Hypocrites," "Hypocrisy" in the Bible

Mat 24:50-51	Luk 12:46
The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for <i>him</i> , and in an hour that he is not aware of, 51 And shall cut him asunder, and appoint <i>him</i> his portion with the <b>hypocrites</b> :	The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for <i>him</i> , and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the <b>unbelievers</b> .

Table 13: Equivalence of "hypocrite" and "unbeliever"

<sup>30</sup> See notes for further discussion.

insincerity, but rebellion against the Lord associated with wickedness and unbelief.

## Blind

The third characteristic word in this section is “blind,” concentrated in vv. 16-26. This is an important word in Matthew. He uses it twice as often as the other synoptics, and is the only one to use it metaphorically to describe his adversaries.<sup>31</sup> It often describes one of our Lord’s most common and dramatic miracles, giving sight to the blind, which Isa 35:5 offers as a sign that the Messianic age has come. Healings of two blind men occur early in the gospel, at the end of the miracles section in ch. 8-9 (9:27-29), and again as he turns in Jericho to ascend from the Jordan valley to Jerusalem (20:30-34). Even in Jerusalem, “the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them” (21:14). But there is one group of blind people whom he does not heal—the scribes and Pharisees, afflicted not with a physical malady, but with spiritual blindness. By describing them as blind, he reduces them to the status of the helpless beggars. But unlike those physically blind people, these spiritually blind teachers do not know that they are blind, and thus do not ask for healing. The narrative in John 9 highlights the contrast between the physically blind, who receive the Lord’s healing, and the spiritually blind, who resist him.

Let’s review this theme of spiritual blindness. The earliest references I can find are in Isaiah,<sup>32</sup> who is also the one who describes the healing of the physically blind as a sign of the Messianic age. He uses the idiom of both Gentiles and Jews.

In the case of Gentiles, the blindness is seen as endemic, natural, part of the bondage to sin under which they labor (chart):<sup>33</sup>

Isa 42:6 I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a **light** of the Gentiles; 7 **To open the blind eyes**, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, *and* them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.

This corresponds to Paul’s later explanation of Satan’s role in blinding people:

2Co 4:3 But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: 4 In whom the god of this world hath **blinded** the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. 5 For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

31 Luke 6:39 cites a proverb that was no doubt often applied to non-physical blindness: “Can the blind lead the blind? shall they not both fall into the ditch?” But the Lord does not apply it to his adversaries explicitly. Luke’s most immediate application is to how the Lord’s followers are to treat one another, 6:42: “Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother’s eye.”

32 Psa 146:7-8 is probably late and dependent on Isa 42:6-7 and 61:1.

33 See the exposition of this passage for details. The Lord’s use of this passage to call Paul to his Gentile ministry (Acts 26:16-18) show that the bondage here at least includes the Gentile’s bondage under “the power of Satan.”



## Matthew 21:18-23:39

He describes the result of what Satan does in 1 Cor 2:

1Co 2:14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.

As in Isaiah 42, these passages describe the blindness that afflicts all unbelievers, because they are fallen sinners.

But when Isaiah turns to the Jews, we hear a different story. They, after all, had the true light in God's gracious dealings with them through the patriarchs, and in their access to his written revelation. They are blind, not because of Satan's dominion over all of Adam's children, but because of their sin against knowledge and God's subsequent judgment (chart):

Isa 6:9 And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. 10 Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and **shut their eyes**; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.

Isa 29:10 For the LORD hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and **hath closed your eyes**: the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered.

Isa 44:18 They have not known nor understood: for **he hath shut their eyes**, that they cannot see; *and* their hearts, that they cannot understand.

Isa 42:19 **Who is blind, but my servant?** or deaf, as my messenger *that* I sent? who is blind as *he that is* perfect [in a covenant of peace], and blind as the LORD'S servant?

These latter verses describe the condition of the Jewish leaders. They are blind because they refuse to see. As the Lord says to them in John,

Joh 5:39 Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. 40 And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.

God has blinded them in response to their sin, and that is why they now reject the Lord.

This contrast offers us a sober warning. The more light we have, the greater our liability to judgment if we sin against it.

### **Text**

To understand the structure of the passage, we have to deal with another textual issue. What the KJV records as v. 14 is lacking in the oldest mss (chart). Hodges and Farstad give it the siglum for the full majority, but its location varies. Stephanus has it after v. 13, which is where the KJV puts it, but most mss, including W (4th-5<sup>th</sup> century) and the MT editions (Hodges-Farstad and Robinson-Pierpont) put it first in the list, and we will see that this makes more sense structurally.

**Structure**

In Isaiah’s woes, we saw two patterns: the consequence can directly follow the woe, or it can follow a group of woes. We see both of these patterns in Matthew 23. If we put v. 14 first, where the MT puts it, it is the only woe that that includes its own description of the consequence. In addition, its contents are a concise description of hypocrisy. Thus it serves as a summary of the remainder of the chapter (Figure 7, chart). The following seven woes fall into three groups, culminating with another warning of coming judgment in vv. 33-36.

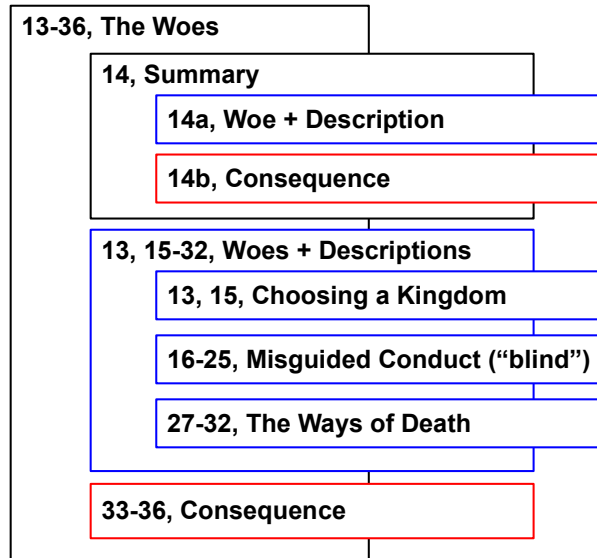


Figure 7: The ABAB Structure of the Woes

**14, Introductory Summary**

The first woe defines hypocrisy, and by including its own judgment, sets the woe-judgment expectation that governs the rest of the passage.

**14 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayer:--**The grammar is not as simple as the KJV suggests. “Devour” is indicative, but “make prayer” is a participle.<sup>34</sup> In this case, the word translated “and” is functioning adverbially to indicate surprise: “ye devour widows’ houses, even while making long prayers.” The verse opens the list with a canonical example of hypocrisy, inconsistency in our spiritual and daily lives.<sup>35</sup>

**therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.--**Unlike the other woes, this one includes its own promise of judgment.

It’s bad enough to devour widows’ houses, but to do so while pretending to be especially pious is egregious. The Lord has already introduced the notion of grades of judgment (chart):

Mat 11:21 Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I say unto you, It shall be **more tolerable** for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. 23 And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24 But I say unto you, That it shall be **more tolerable** for the land of Sodom in the day of

34 See notes for discussion of the grammar.

35 David Nelson notes an interesting contrast between this behavior and that of the apostles in Acts 6:3, 4. Like the Pharisees, the apostles recognize the need to “give ourselves continually to prayer.” Unlike the Pharisees, they do not make this devotion an excuse to abuse widows, but on the contrary take steps to ensure that the needs of the widows are met.

judgment, than for thee.

Certainly, those who know the Scriptures best are most responsible for following them. The Lord makes this clear in a parable, as reported by Luke:

Luk 12:47 And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not *himself*, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with **many stripes**. 48 But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with **few stripes**. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.

James picks up this insight:

Jam 3:1 My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the **greater condemnation**.

This insight is consistent with what we saw in our survey of spiritual blindness: exposure to truth increases the consequences if we do not obey what we know. We don't know how the Lord will make this distinction, but one mechanism may be the sheer regret felt by those who knew the truth and did not heed it.

## 13, 15-32, Woes

The rest of the woes fall into three groups, whose order is chronological. The first two reveal the kingdom that the Pharisees have chosen. The next three (marked by repeated references to blindness) describe a result of their choice of kingdom, their perversion of the law in their traditions. The last two, marked by references to sepulchers and tombs, anticipate the final wages of their sin, which is death.

### 13, 15, *Choosing a Kingdom*

These woes contrast the kingdom of heaven with hell, and show the Pharisees' clear choice of affiliation.

**13 But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.**--Throughout the gospel, they are regularly represented as opposing him. A key to recognizing their opposition is the verb "tempt" *πειράζω*. The first time it is used in Matthew, it describes what Satan did to him in the wilderness (Matt 4:1), but all the later references are to the Pharisees (chart):

Mat 16:1 The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came, and **tempting** desired him that he would shew them a sign from heaven.

Mat 19:3 The Pharisees also came unto him, **tempting** him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?

## Matthew 21:18-23:39

Mat 22:17 Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? 18 But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why **tempt** ye me, ye hypocrites?

Mat 22:35 Then one of them, *which was* a lawyer, asked *him a question*, **tempting** him, and saying, 36 Master, which *is* the great commandment in the law?

They are carrying on the mission of Satan, opposing the Lord and his message of the kingdom. Since they are the source of the Scriptures for the common people (recall “Moses seat” in v. 2), they will discourage others from following him as well, and in fact, they ultimately turn the multitudes against him:

Mat 27:20 But the chief priests and elders **persuaded the multitude** that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus.

**15 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.**--The Jews at this period were renowned for their efforts to spread their faith, and the Lord observes the common phenomenon that a convert is often more zealous about the teachings he has adopted than his teacher was. The effect of their tradition was to annul God’s commandments. We saw this in ch. 15 with regard to the obligation to honor father and mother:

Mat 15:6 Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.

We are about to see several more examples in the next section. The Lord has taught throughout that keeping God’s commandments is a hallmark of those who will enter the kingdom. So by diverting people’s attention from the true meaning of Scripture, they exclude them from the kingdom and guide them into hell.

### **16-25, Misguided Conduct**

The second group of woes details the perversion of Scripture that characterizes those who have rejected the kingdom of heaven, yet wish to appear religious. They engage in superficial, feigned obedience that misses the true point of the commands.

The first of these is the only woe that does not call them hypocrites. It describes their legal maneuvers to avoid honoring the law, reminiscent of 15:1-20. The next two woes give further examples of their blindness toward the law. The whole section is tied together by the keyword “blind,” which was also the culmination of his criticism in ch. 15 (chart):

Mat 15:14 Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.

They are blind to the true meaning of Scripture.

The introductory paragraph deals (like 5:33-37) with oaths, and the custom of people to add weight to their assertions by invoking something sacred. This was a common custom, and the Mishnah devotes an entire tractate to the subject.

Unpaired climax		22 And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon.
Temple and gold	16 Woe unto you, ye <b>blind</b> guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! 17 Ye fools and <b>blind</b> : for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?	21 And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein.
Altar and sacrifice	18 And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. 19 Ye fools and <b>blind</b> : for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?	20 Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon.

Table 14: Unpaired climax in Matt 23:16-22

The passage reflects a conceit that oaths by the temple or the altar are less binding than those by specific gifts given to the temple or offerings upon the altar. The Lord organizes his remarks chiasmically. Each panel is unified by an internal alternation, and an unpaired supplement makes the main point (Table 14, chart).

One can imagine that a speaker might casually refer to the temple or the altar to substantiate his statements. The scribes and Pharisees decided that unless such an oath took care to mention the offerings, it was not really binding. The Lord rejects this casuistry. It is the altar that sanctifies the gift, not the other way around (chart):

Exo 29:37 Seven days thou shalt make an atonement for the altar, and sanctify it; and it shall be an altar most holy: **whatsoever toucheth the altar** shall be holy.

Exo 30:26 And thou shalt anoint the tabernacle of the congregation therewith, and the ark of the testimony, 27 And the table and all his vessels, and the candlestick and his vessels, and the altar of incense, 28 And the altar of burnt offering with all his vessels, and the laver and his foot. 29 And thou shalt sanctify them, that they may be most holy: **whatsoever toucheth them** shall be holy.

The real issue, missing in all their careful logic, is that these implements of religion are intended to focus the worshiper's attention on God. The Lord makes this point by breaking the symmetry. The internal alternation in 20-21 would require that 21 end with the words, "by all things therein." But the Lord shifts the reference to the Lord, and then expands it with a reference to oaths by heaven, which were also in focus in ch. 5,

Mat 5:33 Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: 34 But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: 35 Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King.

Lies are wrong, not because they violate a reference to holy things, but because “a lying tongue” is “an abomination unto” the Lord,

Pro 6:16 These six *things* doth the LORD hate: yea, seven *are* an abomination unto him:  
17 A proud look, **a lying tongue**, and hands that shed innocent blood, 18 An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, 19 **A false witness that speaketh lies**, and he that soweth discord among brethren.

God commanded Abraham,

Gen 17:1 I *am* the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

Our integrity must be based on our walk with God, not formulas we utter over our promises.

Now he turns to two other examples of pious behavior that also miss the real point. The first concerns the relative importance of offerings compared with other duties.

**23 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin,**--This is the central woe. In keeping with its central (emphatic) location, it offers a general diagnosis that applies to all three of the central woes. It poses a contrast that is a striking warning about priorities to all who would teach God’s people.

It was biblical to tithe agricultural produce (chart):

Lev 27:30 And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD'S: it is holy unto the LORD.

Deu 14:22 Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth year by year.

The Pharisees show their zeal with their attention to detail, assiduously setting aside a tenth even of their garden herbs for the Lord.

**and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith[fulness]:**--In discerning something that is more important than offerings, the Lord is echoing the prophets.

Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, deprecates the offerings that people bring the Lord, in the face of their neglect of fundamental principles of justice:

Mic 6:6 Wherewith shall I come before the LORD, *and* bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, *or* with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn *for* my transgression, the fruit of my body *for* the sin of my soul? 8 He hath shewed thee, O man, what *is* good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but **to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?**

Hosea, Micah’s contemporary, makes the same point:

Hos 6:6 For I desired **mercy**, and not sacrifice; and the **knowledge of God**<sup>36</sup> more than

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36 See notes for analysis of this expression, which is very much parallel to Mic 6:8 “walk humbly with thy God.”

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burnt offerings.

Hos 12:6 Therefore turn thou to thy God: keep **mercy** and **judgment**, and **wait on thy God** continually.

These correspond to the three categories in Micah and Hosea (Table 15, chart).<sup>37</sup>

*Judgment:* The most common Hebrew original of κρισις is משפט, which refers to an ordinance of God, then to conduct in keeping with those ordinances. It is paired with “righteousness” in God’s description of Abraham and his seed:

Gen 18:19 he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment צדקה ומשפט.

The true believer has the attitude toward God’s law of the Psalmist,

Psa 40:8 I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law *is* within my heart.

We desire to do *the right things*.

*Mercy:* Ελεος regularly translates חסד, covenant love. Judgment (or justice) motivates us by our alignment with God’s commands, and the Pharisees would, like Paul before his salvation, claimed perfection on this score:

Phi 3:6 touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

But mercy views the law, not just as a list of commands, but as the expression of the covenant by which God binds himself to his people. It involves doing the right things *for the right reason*.

*Faith:* Here interpreters are divided. In the LXX, πιστις mostly translates אמונה, less frequently אמת. These both have the sense “faithfulness, steadfastness,” reflecting on our *conduct*. But throughout the NT, the KJV regularly translates πιστις as “faith” (239/244 times),<sup>38</sup> which we usually understand as a *mental attitude*, and tend to contrast with conduct. Paul regularly contrasts πιστις with works. Matthew elsewhere uses πιστις to describe the quality that calls forth healing (8:10; 9:2, 22, 29; 15:28) or moves mountains (17:20-21; 21:21).

Given Matthew’s strong Jewish orientation, we should be cautious about assuming he would use a word in a different sense than the LXX. And in light of the parallels with the prophets, the meaning at least in this passage would appear to involve faithfulness, “walking humbly with God” and “waiting on thy God.”<sup>39</sup> But what about Matthew’s other uses of the term?

Matt 23:23	Mic 6:8	Hos 6:6	Hos 12:6
Judgment κρισις	Do justly (“judgment”)		Judgment
Mercy ελεος	Love mercy	Mercy	Mercy
Faith[fulness] πιστις	Walk humbly with thy God	Knowledge of God	Wait on thy God

Table 15: OT Roots of 23:23b

37 See notes for Hebrew words translated in the LXX by these three terms.

38 It is rendered with cognates of “believe” three times, as “assurance” once, and as “fidelity,” the closest to the LXX sense, only in Titus 2:10.

39 Luke’s parallel (11:42) uses the expression “the love of God,” which aligns well with the parallels in Hosea.

Perhaps we should reconsider what faith is. It does involve a mental commitment to the Lord (cf. Hos 6:6 “knowledge of God”). But such a commitment leads to a humble walk with God, that is, being faithful to him.<sup>40</sup> As James says (2:20), “Faith without works is dead.” Precisely because of the LXX usage, we should be cautious about attributing the healings in Matthew, or the moving of mountains, to an abstract mental attitude. Those seeking to be healed and whom the Lord commended for their faith, showed it by seeking out the Lord persistently.

Think of the four men who brought their friend to the Lord, opening the roof to gain access when they could not enter by the door (Matt 9:1-2, cf. Luke 5:18-19). Of them, it is said that Jesus “saw their faith,” that is, the faithful action to which the faith led. Or consider the two blind men, who followed him into the house (9:28-29), or the Canaanite woman, who persisted against the Lord’s initial rebuff (15:28). In each case, faith leads to faithfulness.

It is likely that throughout the NT, this principle is valid.<sup>41</sup> Paul, indeed, states that faithfulness (works) is not needed to be received by God:

Rom 4:6 Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, *7 Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.*

David was not forgiven because of his faithfulness—the need for forgiveness was evidence that he was in fact unfaithful. But Paul also teaches that true faith will lead to faithfulness to God:

Rom 8:4 That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

**these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.**--God had, after all, commanded tithing one’s crops.

**24 Ye blind guides, which strain at [out]<sup>42</sup> a gnat, and swallow a camel.**--Both were unclean animals. The image is a caricature of misplaced priorities. He uses it to summarize what he has said about tithing and the big three requirements of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Their care in tithing kitchen herbs is like straining out the tiny gnat, while their violation of Micah 6:8, Hos 6:6, and Hos 12:6 is like swallowing a camel.

The central position of this woe focuses our attention on it, and the principle it establishes lies at the heart of our Lord’s criticism of the Pharisees’ teaching. They miss the forest for the trees, a warning that we should keep carefully in mind in our study and teaching of the Word of God.

**25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter,**--Again, this was a matter of contemporary concern (chart):

Mar 7:4 And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, *as the*

40 As with “mercy,” the focus is not restricted to ethical conduct toward other people, and the prophets show that faith[fulness] in particular should be understood as our conduct toward God.

41 See Burton, *Galatians* (ICC), 475-485.

42 The verb means “strain out.” The KJV is an archaic usage documented in OED.



washing [dipping] of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables.

Again, it goes back to the law of Moses:

Lev 11:31 These [various unclean animals, such as mice] *are* unclean to you among all that creep: whosoever doth touch them, when they be dead, shall be unclean until the even. 32 And upon whatsoever *any* of them, when they are dead, doth fall, it shall be unclean; whether *it be* any vessel of wood, or raiment, or skin, or sack, whatsoever vessel *it be*, wherein *any* work is done, it must be put into water, and it shall be unclean until the even; so it shall be cleansed. 33 And every earthen vessel, whereinto *any* of them falleth, whatsoever *is* in it shall be unclean; and ye shall break it.

There were rabbinical discussions about the difference between the inside and the outside of a cup.<sup>43</sup> But the next clause shows that the example is more than just a criticism of their interpretation of the law. It is an object lesson about the Pharisees themselves.

**but within they are full of extortion and excess.**--If the Lord were speaking only of physical vessels, he would have said that they are full of dirt, rotten food, dead mice, etc. "Greed and unrighteousness" are characteristics of people, not of pottery, showing that he is using "cup and platter" metaphorically to describe the Jewish leaders. He is transitioning from a criticism of their teaching, to condemning them personally a move that continues in the next woe.

**26 Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.**--They need to cleanse themselves.

### **27-32, The Ways of Death**

The last two woes associate the Pharisees with sepulchers, reminding them that death is the natural outcome of the position they have taken.

**27 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres,**-- Tombs of holy people in Israel are regularly whitewashed, or made of white limestone (Figure 8, chart). A more modern example is the Taj Mahal, or other great tombs constructed to honor important people (the tomb of Napoleon in Paris, France, or General MacArthur's tomb and memorial in Norfolk, VA, or the memorials to Sun Yat Sen and Chiang Kai Shek



Figure 8: Rachel's tomb, Bethlehem  
[http://www.atlastours.net/holyland/rachels\\_tomb.jpg](http://www.atlastours.net/holyland/rachels_tomb.jpg)

<sup>43</sup> Neusner, "First Clean the Inside." *NTS* 22 (1975-1976), 486-495.

in Taipei, Taiwan, or the mausoleum and protecting clay army of the first Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang). In every case, the tendency of the flesh is to deny the ugliness and corruption of death and dress it up with a beautiful monument.

**which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.**--In fact, one reason recorded in the Mishna for marking the graves was so that people could avoid the ceremonial defilement incurred by touching them.

**28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.**--No matter how beautiful one makes a tomb, there is no secret about the corruption that lies within it. But this is what characterizes the Pharisees. As in the previous woe, the focus has shifted from their teaching to themselves.

**29 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous,**--In fact, they participate in decorating these tombs.

**30 And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.**--They admit that the prophets in ancient days were not respected, but slain unjustly by their ancestors. In fact, the OT itself recognizes that abuse of the prophets led to God's discipline on his people. The Chronicler specifically associates this behavior with the priests, as leading to the Babylonian captivity:

2Ch 36:14 Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem. 15 And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: 16 **But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets,** until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till *there was* no remedy. 17 **Therefore** he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age: he gave *them* all into his hand.

But it goes much further back in their history. The book of Judges describes repeated cycles of disobedience to the Lord, divine chastisement, supplication, and deliverance by a judge, and Psalm 78 describes similar cycles. After the return from captivity, Nehemiah describes the repeated cycles of judgment, repentance, and deliverance, with special emphasis on the rejection of the prophets whom God sent to warn them at each step:

Neh 9:26 Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations. ... 28 and many times didst thou deliver them according to thy mercies; 29 And testifiedst against them, that thou mightest bring them again unto thy law: yet they dealt proudly, and hearkened not unto thy commandments, but sinned against thy judgments, ... 30 Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and

testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear:

The Lord has already drawn their attention to these past events figuratively, in the parable of the wicked tenants (21:33-41). Now he accuses them directly.

**31 Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.**--Thus one should not be surprised if they conduct themselves the same way their fathers did.

**32 Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.**--The “measure” reflects the notion that God’s judgment falls when someone’s sin reaches a critical level (chart):<sup>44</sup>

Gen 15:16 But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.

1Th 2:16 Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.

The imperative is ironic. “Go ahead and complete their sin, so that judgment may fall.” There are other examples of such irony in the Bible:

Isa 8:9 Associate yourselves, O ye people, and ye shall be broken in pieces; and give ear, all ye of far countries: gird yourselves, and ye shall be broken in pieces; gird yourselves, and ye shall be broken in pieces. 10 Take counsel together, and it shall come to nought; speak the word, and it shall not stand: for God *is* with us.

Amo 4:4 Come to Bethel, and transgress; at Gilgal multiply transgression; and bring your sacrifices every morning, *and* your tithes after three years: 5 And offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, and proclaim *and* publish the free offerings: for this liketh you, O ye children of Israel, saith the Lord GOD.

Rev 22:11 He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.

And in the next section, the Lord describes what will be the consequence of their wickedness—not just in opposing God’s prophets, but in all of the sins described in the seven woes.

### 33-36, Judgment

The structure of OT woes, and v. 14, lead us to expect a statement of the consequences of the behavior that he has condemned, and now we come to that condemnation.

**33 Ye serpents, ye generation γεννημα 1081 of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?**--“Generation” here means offspring. John the baptist introduced the imagery (chart):

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44 The concept is familiar to Jewish thought: B Sotah 9a, “R. Hamuna said: The Holy One, blessed be He, does not exact punishment of a man until his measure [of guilt] is filled; as it is said: 'In the fullness of his sufficiency he shall be in straits, etc' [Job 20:22].” <http://juchre.org/talmud/sotah/sotah1.htm#9a>

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Mat 3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, **O generation of vipers**, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

And the Lord carries it on:

Mat 12:34 **O generation of vipers**, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.

The serpent imagery recalls the form in which Satan led Adam and Eve astray in Genesis 3. This expression is thus Matthew’s counterpart to our Lord’s saying in John,

Joh 8:44 **Ye are of your father the devil**, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.

The Lord’s description of the scribes and Pharisees as offspring of vipers aligns with his choice of the verb “tempt” to describe how they treat him, which links them to the temptation in ch. 4 and thus also emphasizes their identity with Satan.

**34 Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes:--**

These three kinds of people correspond to the three sections of the Jewish canon: scribes preoccupied with the law (cf. Ezra 7:6 “a ready scribe in the law of Moses”), prophets, and the wise men who

Prolog to Sirach (~100 BC)	Luke 24:44	Ezek 7:25	Matt 23:34
The law	The law of Moses	b) The law shall perish from the priest	c) Scribes (gospels)
The prophets	The prophets	a) A vision of the prophet	a) Prophets (Revelation, 2 Peter)
The others ... the other books ... the rest of the books	The psalms	c) Council [shall perish] from the ancients	b) Wise men (epistles)

*Table 16: The Three-Fold Jewish Canon*

wrote the third section, the hagiographa. These categories were already recognized in the second century before Christ, by the author of the prolog to the apocryphal book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) (Table 16, chart):

Sip 1:1 many and great things have been delivered unto us by **the law and the prophets, and by others** that have followed their steps ... my grandfather Jesus ... had much given himself to the reading of **the law, and the prophets, and other books** of our fathers ... **the law itself, and the prophets, and the rest of the books**

Our Lord himself summarizes the OT in similar terms:

Luk 24:44 These *are* the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written **in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms**, concerning me.

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He names Psalms as the first book of the third section.

The OT prophets recognized the sources of these three classes of Scripture, and anticipated that they would come to an end:<sup>45</sup>

Eze 7:26 Mischief shall come upon mischief, and rumour shall be upon rumour; then shall they seek a vision of the **prophet**; but the law shall perish from the **priest**, and counsel from the **ancients**.

Israel recognized when the divine voice fell silent, as in the time when Samuel arose:

1Sa 3:1 And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; *there was* no open vision.

The time of the Maccabees, the second century before Christ, was such a time:<sup>46</sup>

1Ma 9:27 So was there a great affliction in Israel, the like whereof was not **since the time that a prophet was not seen among them**.<sup>47</sup>

Years later, the Talmud records the awareness that revelation ended with the post-exilic prophets:

When Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel.<sup>48</sup>

Ezekiel predicted that the prophet, the priest (the source of law), and the ancients (the source of wise counsel) would come to an end. But now the Lord promises to send three new sources of revelation. He does not promise to send more priests, for as the priest after the order of Melchizedek he brings an end to that function. But the scribes were preoccupied with exposition of the law, and he does promise prophets and wise men. In other words, he is announcing that he is opening the canon again, and on his authority, new revelation is to be expected.

**and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:**--Just as they slew the messengers of the old covenant, so they will destroy those of the new. Acts records the fulfillment of this prophecy (chart). They killed Stephen and James, and tried to kill Peter.

Act 7:59 And they stoned **Stephen**, calling upon *God*, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Act 12:1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth *his* hands to vex certain of the church. 2 And he killed **James** the brother of John with the sword. 3 And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take **Peter** also.

And their persecution “from city to city” led to the spread of the early church:

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45 Cf. Jer 18:18, where insistence that these three shall continue was a conceit of Jeremiah’s opponents.

46 Beckwith argues that this recognition that active revelation had ceased is a likely motive for the canonization of the OT under Judas Maccabaeus.

47 4:46 and 14:41 recognize the lack of a “faithful prophet” who could guide the people in specific decisions.

48 Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 48b, <http://juchre.org/talmud/sotah/sotah2.htm#48b> ; see Beckwith, esp. pp. 369ff.

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Act 8:1 And at that time there was a great **persecution** against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Act 11:19 Now they which were scattered abroad upon the **persecution** that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.

**35 That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.**--The conjunction “that” expresses purpose. Their mistreatment of those who bring the new revelation will confirm their identity with those who rejected the OT prophets, and justify their condemnation.

We all know who Abel is, but who is Zacharias the son of Barachias?

The event described corresponds to 2 Chron 24, in the days of Joash the king (chart):

2Ch 24:20 And the Spirit of God came upon **Zechariah** the son of **Jehoiada** the **priest**, which stood above the people, and said unto them, Thus saith God, Why transgress ye the commandments of the LORD, that ye cannot prosper? because ye have forsaken the LORD, he hath also forsaken you. 21 And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the LORD.

The problem is that the Zechariah in Chronicles is the son of Jehoiada, while our Lord describes him as the son of Barachias. And in fact there is a later Zechariah with that name, after the captivity, in the time of the second temple.

Zec 1:1 In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, came the word of the LORD unto **Zechariah**, the son of **Berechiah**, the son of **Iddo** the prophet,

The commentaries discuss the issue at length. The best solution is to recognize a rabbinic custom of identifying people with similar names, or even similar characteristics, as a homiletic device.<sup>49</sup> The motive is to enhance the virtues of the righteous by associating them with other similar righteous people. Here we have two righteous people, both with the same name, and both priests:

Neh 12:1 Now these *are* the **priests** and the Levites that went up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, ... 4 **Iddo**, ... 12 And in the days of Joiakim [the high priest] were **priests**, the chief of the fathers: ... 16 Of **Iddo**, **Zechariah**;

Not only are they both priests, but the behavior of the son of Jehoiada in 2 Chronicles 24 is very prophetic, in its rebuke of the people’s sin. So the first Zechariah, while called a priest, is also a prophet, while the second one, remembered as a prophet, is also a priest, and by merging their names, the Jews highlighted this similarity. It had apparently become customary to refer to the Zechariah in Chronicles as “the son of Berechiah” or “son of Iddo,” a tradition also found in the Aramaic targum on Lam 2:20.

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49 Beckwith, *Old Testament Canon*, pp. 212-220, based on Chajes, *Student’s Guide Through the Talmud*, ch. 21.

Matthew 21:18-23:39

Tar Lam. 2:20 See, O LORD, and observe *from heaven* against whom you have turned. Thus is it *right for the daughters of Israel to eat the fruit of their wombs due to starvation, the lovely boys wrapped in fine linen?* The Attribute of Justice replied, and said, “Is it right to kill priest and prophet in the Temple of the LORD, *as when you killed Zechariah son of Iddo, the High Priest and faithful prophet in the Temple of the LORD on the Day of Atonement because he admonished you not to do evil before the LORD?*”<sup>50</sup>

So our Lord is using a conventional Jewish way of describing Zechariah, in order to highlight his prophetic work in rebuking the nation, and thus to strengthen his case that “Jerusalem ... kill[s] the prophets” (v. 37)

Once we understand the reference to 2 Chronicles, the Lord’s point becomes clear. Abel is the first martyr in the Bible, as described in Genesis 4. In the Hebrew canon, 2 Chronicles is the last book, and Zechariah the priest is the last martyr. The reference to the two thus encompasses the entire Old Testament, every prophet of God ever rejected by the Hebrew people. The Lord is recalling what the fathers of the scribes and Pharisees did (cf. v. 31). There, he implied that the current generation shares their guilt, and now he makes it explicit: “whom ye slew” (v. 35).

**36 Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.**--This word “generation” (γενεα, Strong 1074) is a different Greek word than the one in v. 33, “generation of vipers” (γεννημα, Strong 1081). In Matthew, “this generation” is most naturally chronological, rather than meaning “race” or “tribe”<sup>51</sup> (chart):

Mat 1:17 So all the generations from Abraham to David *are* fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon *are* fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ *are* fourteen generations.

Our Lord regularly characterizes his contemporaries (“this generation”) as wicked, and usually threatens them with judgment:

Matt. 11:16 But whereunto shall I liken **this generation**? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows,

Matt. 12:41 The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with **this generation**, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas *is* here.

Matt. 12:42 The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with **this generation**, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon *is* here.

Matt. 23:36 Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon **this generation**.

Matt. 24:34 Verily I say unto you, **This generation** shall not pass, till all these things be

50 <http://targum.info/meg/tglam.htm>, from MS Urb. 1. The Targum dates to AD 324-500 (Philip S. Alexander, <https://www.litpress.org/Products/GetSample/5864/9780814658642> ). Non-italic type is from the Hebrew, italics show additions by the targumist.

51 See note for further discussion.

fulfilled [occur].

**37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee,**--Recall the parable in 21:35. These three verses (35-37) offer an interpretation of the parable of the wicked tenants in 21:33-41. Throughout the OT, the nation has rejected all of the prophets. Now they are rejecting the Son, and will bear the judgment appropriate to their sin.

**how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!**--In the OT, it is the Lord God who provides sheltering wings to protect his people (chart):

Rut 2:12 The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.

Psa 17:8 Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me under the shadow of thy wings,

Psa 36:7 How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.

Psa 57:1 To the chief Musician, Altaschith, Michtam of David, when he fled from Saul in the cave. Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.

Psa 63:7 Because thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice.

Psa 91:4 He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.

The Lord presents himself as the one to provide that protection, another claim to deity.

**38 Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.**--Three details deserve our attention: the house is described as *desolate*, it is *left*, and it is *your* house.

First, the notion that the “house,” that is, the temple, would become “desolate” ερημος (Strong 2048) is common figure among the OT prophets discussing the Babylonian captivity (chart).<sup>52</sup>

Jer 22:5 But if ye will not hear these words, I swear by myself, saith the LORD, that this **house** shall become a **desolation ερημωσις**.

Upon the return, Ezra focused on rebuilding and rededicating the temple, and he prays to God,

Ezr 9:9 For we *were* bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the **house** of our God, and to repair the **desolations ερημος** thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.

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<sup>52</sup> In addition to these canonical references, Tobit 14:4 offers a prediction of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in these terms: “Tob 14:4 Jerusalem shall be desolate, and the house of God in it shall be burned, and shall be desolate for a time.”



When the people were slow in this work, the Lord rebuked them through Haggai:

Hag 1:9 Ye looked for much, and, lo, *it came* to little; and when ye brought *it* home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine **house** that *is waste* **ερημος**, and ye run every man unto his own house.

In the LXX, “waste” and “desolation” are either the same as or a cognate of ερημος, the word rendered “desolate” in v. 38. By invoking these passages, the Lord again<sup>53</sup> is anticipating a repeat of the Babylonian catastrophe, when the temple was destroyed.

So “your house” clearly refers to the temple. But that leads to the second point we must notice. The house is being left, abandoned.<sup>54</sup> The following verse explains this abandonment by saying that they will no longer see him there. It is abandoned because he leaves it. We will shortly see an amazing parallel between our Lord’s departure from the temple and what happened in Ezekiel’s day, when the Glory of the Lord left the temple. That divine departure left the first temple vulnerable to desolation by Nebuchadnezzar, and the Lord’s departure now leaves it vulnerable to desolation by the Romans, and later by the Antichrist.

The third point is that because he has abandoned the house, it is no longer God’s house, but theirs. Throughout the Scriptures, and even in the passages promising desolation at the time of the Babylonian captivity, the temple is described as God’s house. When the Lord enters the temple to cleanse, Matthew notes that he “entered the temple of God” (21:12), and recalls his words.

Mat 21:12 And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, 13 And said unto them, It is written, **My house** shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

Compare the remarkable confession that Isaiah predicts for the nation after the Babylonian disaster. The people and cities still belong to God, but the house is theirs only.<sup>55</sup>

Isa 64:9 Be not wroth very sore, O LORD, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we *are* all **thy** people. 10 **Thy** holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. 11 **Our holy and our beautiful house**, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire: and all our pleasant things are laid waste.

**39 For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.**--Indeed, the multitudes did greet him this way when he entered the city (21:9), quoting Psalm 118. But in that Psalm, as we saw, it is the house of Aaron

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53 We saw in v.30 that the reference to rejecting the prophets recalls the condemnation of Israel before the Babylonian captivity.

54 “Left” αφεημι has the sense of “abandoned” in Ezek 16:39 “I ... will **leave** thee naked and bare,” Jer 12:7 I have forsaken mine house, I have **left** mine heritage; Isa 32:14 “As for the forsaken houses, they have **left** rich cities and pleasant houses...”

55 Compare Moses’ wrestling with the Lord in Exod 32:7-11, disagreeing over whether the people were the Lord’s or Moses’.

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who are to welcome him, and at his triumphal entry, they rejected those who greeted him as the Psalm commands.

Thus the Lord brings to a close the woes on the scribes and Pharisees, and with them, the Great Debate (Figure 1, chart). He began with an acted parable, cursing a fig tree that promised fruit but was barren. Then he detailed the fruitlessness of the chief priests (in three parables) and the Pharisees (in three questions), surrounding these encounters with exhortations to his disciples to faith and humility. Now he gives the meaning of the cursed fig tree: it corresponds to the scribes and Pharisees, who like it give the appearance of fruitfulness but are in fact barren, and shall suffer divine cursing for their hypocrisy.

## Notes

### Parallels with Isa 5

Mat 21:33 33 Ἄλλην παραβολὴν ἀκούσατε. Ἄνθρωπός τις ἦν οἰκοδεσπότης, ὅστις **ἐφύτευσεν ἄμπελῶνα**, καὶ **φραγμὸν αὐτῷ περιέθηκεν**, καὶ **ῥυξεν ἐν αὐτῷ ληνόν**, καὶ **ῥυξεν πύργον**, καὶ ἐξέδοτο αὐτὸν γεωργοῖς, καὶ ἀπεδήμησεν.

Isa 5:1-2 ἄσω δὴ τῷ ἠγαπημένῳ ἕσμα τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ τῷ ἀμπελῶνί μου **ἀμπελῶν** ἐγενήθη τῷ ἠγαπημένῳ ἐν κέρατι ἐν τόπῳ πίνι 2 καὶ **φραγμὸν περιέθηκα** καὶ ἐχαράκωσα καὶ **ἐφύτευσα ἄμπελον** σωρηχ καὶ **ῥυξεν πύργον** ἐν μέσῳ αὐτοῦ καὶ **προλήνιον ῥυξα ἐν αὐτῷ** καὶ ἔμεινα τοῦ ποιῆσαι σαφυλὴν ἐποίησεν δὲ ἀκάνθας

### Christ as the Stone

Here is an enlarged version of the table from the Isa 8 study. I've only presented an excerpt in the exposition of Matthew, focusing on the texts that he quotes. Our Lord cites Dan 2, which we have not seen before, but does not use Isa 28, which Paul and Peter do.

Ps 118:22, 23	Isa 8:14-15	Isa 28:16	Dan 2:34, 44	Matt 21:42-44	Rom 9:33	1 Pet 2:7-8
		Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD,			As it is written,	
		Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone,			Behold, I lay in Sion	
	And he shall be for a sanctuary;	a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation:				7 Unto you therefore which believe <i>he is</i> precious:
22 The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner.				42 Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner:		but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner,
23 This is the LORD'S doing; it is				this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our		

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Ps 118:22, 23	Isa 8:14-15	Isa 28:16	Dan 2:34, 44	Matt 21:42-44	Rom 9:33	1 Pet 2:7-8
marvellous in our eyes.				eyes?		
	but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel,				a stumblingstone and rock of offence:	8 And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, <i>even to them</i> which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.
			44 And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom	43 Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.		
	15 And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken.			44 And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken:		
			34 Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces.	but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.		
		he that believeth shall not make			and whosoever believeth on him shall not be	

Ps 118:22, 23	Isa 8:14-15	Isa 28:16	Dan 2:34, 44	Matt 21:42-44	Rom 9:33	1 Pet 2:7-8
		haste.			ashamed.	

### **See the Face of somebody**

The expression βλέπω εἰς πρόσωπον in 22:16 is usually understood in the sense of the Hebrew phrase פָּנָה אִשָּׁה "to lift up the face," meaning to accept, then to favor somebody. But the LXX never translates the expression this way. We should distinguish cases when the face belongs to the subject of the verb, from those when it belongs to the object.

Object: The most common translation is θαυμάζω πρόσωπον (Gen 19:21; Deut 10:17; 28:50; 2 Ki 5:1; Job 13:10; 22:8; Prov 18:5; adjective without "face" in Isa 3:3), with variants: προσδεχομαι (Gen 32:21), αἰρετιζω (1 Sam 25:35), επαισχυνομαι (Job 34:19), λαμβανω (Lev 19:15; Job 42:8; Psa 82:2 [81:2 LXX]; Mal 1:8, 9; 2:9). Without reference to face at all: ανταλλασσω (Prov 6:35); υποστελλω (Job 13:8); αισχυνομαι (Job 32:21); θαυμαστος (Isa 3:3). Here the reference is to giving someone special treatment because of who they are. In the context of the idiom, θαυμάζω just edges out λαμβανω (7x vs. 6x) as the dominant translation; it is also dedicated.

Subject: Here the meaning does not refer to regarding the person of someone else, but rather, of holding up one's own head, either physically or as an idiom for a confident or positive attitude. Num 6:25 is a good example: "The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee." αἰρω (2 Sam 2:22), επαίρω (Num 6:26; 2 Kings 9:32, in a physical sense), αναλαμπω (Job 11:15). Num 6:26 is a good example: "the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee."

Given the range of variation, the questioners may have intended the expression in the sense of the OT expression, but it opens the way for the alternative sense noted by Derrett, which is what the Lord does in looking at the coin.

### **The Pharisees' Command in 23:3**

Currently, the popular explanation is that we should not take the first imperative at face value. Either it should be understood as a concessive imperative (Francis, Luz) or as irony (Carson). The early church (according to Luz) understood the passage to be limited to what Moses taught, and some moderns (Clarke, Gill, Allen in ICC) follow this line, but modern commentators find this inconsistent with the scope of the "whatsoever."

But Wallace's study of the imperative (*Greek Grammar* p. 490,) challenges this modern view. See also his discussion of Eph 4:26 in *Criswell Theo. Review* 3.2 (1989) 353-372, where he allows either conditional or injunctive interpretation but prefers injunctive, and in the later *Grammar*, where he rules out conditional because the apodosis is also an imperative. But that is exactly the situation we find here.

I am returning to the traditional view, but with a more subtle basis. The KJV accurately renders the first command:

Mat 23:3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that* observe and do;

Mat 23:3 πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν εἴπωσιν ὑμῖν τηρεῖν, τηρεῖτε καὶ ποιεῖτε·

In particular, it preserves the two verbs in the description of what the Pharisees do, “bid” and “observe.” The particular class of Pharisaic command that the Lord has in mind is the command to pay attention to certain things, not their injunctions in general. When the Lord picks up the verb τηρεω, he clearly does not mean it in the sense of “do,” for he adds καὶ ποιεῖτε. To expand the meaning: because the Pharisees occupy the place of Moses, when they draw your attention to something in Moses (when they “bid you observe”), pay attention to that item, and carry it out. But the disciples are not to follow their works, their *halakah*, for that is unreliable.

But modern critical editions omit the infinitive τηρεῖν (though Hodges and Farstadt indicate that it has the strongest Majority support), and most (with the possible exception of NET and NIV) and invert τηρεῖτε καὶ ποιεῖτε (or other forms of these roots), leading to translations like these:

ESV: so do and observe **whatever they tell you**

NET: Therefore pay attention to **what they tell you** and do it.

NIV: So you must be careful to do **everything they tell you**

RSV: so practice and observe **whatever they tell you**

NASV: therefore **all that they tell you**, do and observe

ASV: all things therefore **whatsoever they bid you**, *these* do and observe

Clearly, the Lord would contradict his previous criticism of the Pharisees’ teaching if he were to mean “do whatever they tell you,” leading to the pressure to find a rhetorical rereading of the first imperative.

Omission of the first τηρεῖν is no doubt driven by homeoteleuton with ὑμῖν coupled with homeoarchton with τηρεῖτε. But it is noteworthy that the original hand of  $\kappa$  has neither instance, and the line breaks after ΠΟΙΗCΑ. A later hand adds TE K\* THPEI in the margin, which is certainly the easiest way to remedy at least one of the double omissions, though it leaves a strange difference in the tense of the two imperatives (aorist vs. present). Vaticanus follows the corrected reading of  $\kappa$ , but this reading does not appear again until the 8<sup>th</sup> century with L019. W (fifth century) does have the double τηρεω, in MT order (see the facsimile in BW mss tab), with both imperatives replaced with middle 3s indicatives τηρεται καὶ ποιεται, and goes on to use the middle 3s also in the following injunction! W is not listed in the CNTTS apparatus (variant 9); the earliest witnesses CNTTS cites are f and q in the sixth century.

## ***The Grammar of 23:14***

The use of καὶ between an indicative and a participle is initially surprising, and one author

(whom I cannot now identify) takes the shift in verbal form as a mark of the carelessness of the person who supposedly inserted the verse from Mark 12:40, where both verbs are participles. But the construction is in fact evidence of that *καί* here is adverbial (BDAG *καί* 1bη), not conjunctive. See Kermit Titrud’s study in the Black SIL volume, which develops the contrast between coordinating and adverbial uses of *καί*:

The conjunctive *καί* is a coordinating conjunction; it coordinates grammatical units of equal rank in the same way that “and” does in English. When *καί* is found between an indicative verb and a participle the *καί* is an adverb and not a conjoiner. For example, in 2 Peter 2:1b, *καί* is not conjoining similar grammatical units: the participle “denying” is subordinate to the indicative verb “secretly bring in.”<sup>56</sup>

2Pe 2:1 οἵτινες **παρεισάξουσιν** αἰρέσεις ἀπωλείας, καὶ τὸν ἀγοράσαντα αὐτοὺς δεσπότην **ἀρνούμενοι**,

But he gives no other examples. BDAG 1aε also offers the variant reading of P66 and apparently P45 at Joh 11:32, *Μαρία, ὡς ἦλθεν ὅπου ἦν ὁ Ἰησοῦς, καὶ ἰδοῦσα αὐτόν, ἔπεσεν αὐτοῦ εἰς τοὺς πόδας.*

The exposition follows the adverbial understanding.

## **Hypocrites**

רָבָּה and its cognates appear 25 times in the OT, with a variety of translations. It has no clear parallel; the most common translations are “ungodly” *ασεβης* 5x, “defile” *μιαίνω* 4x, “defile by murder” *φονοκτονεω* 3x, and “lawless” *ανομος* 3x. As a result, modern translations rarely use the word in the OT,<sup>57</sup> and scholars<sup>58</sup> have widely hold that “hypocrite” is too narrow a translation. But see now the excellent analysis by Seybold, TDOT V p. 38 on רָבָּה. He review the rabbinic use of the term, and notes that its uses in the OT with reference to people describe “antisocial conduct that uses hypocrisy and deception to fool oneself and others.” He notes that it is often associated with false speech (Pr 11:9; Isa 32:6; 9:16 E 17; Jer 23:11, 15) and offers the paraphrase “deceitful, distorted, hypocritical, base, sanctimonious, secretly perfidious.”

## **Two words for “Generation”**

It’s important to distinguish the Greek words that lie behind vv. 33 and 36. The first, “generation of vipers,” is *γεννημα*, which has no Hebrew reflex. It does occur in the LXX as an addition to Judges 1:10,

Jdg 1:10 And Judas went to the Chananite who dwelt in Chebron; and Chebron came out

<sup>56</sup> Black, D. A., Barnwell, K. G. L., & Levinsohn, S. H. (1992). *Linguistics and New Testament interpretation: essays on discourse analysis* (p. 246). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.

<sup>57</sup> The only instance I can find is Psa 26:4 for *נַעֲלָמִים*, in ESV and NIV; KJV has “dissemblers.”

<sup>58</sup> TDNT; Joüon, *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 20 (1930) 312-316.

against him; [and the name of Chebron before was Cariatharbobcephar:] and they smote Sessi, and Achiman, and Tholmi, **children** of Enac.

And in Sirach,

Sir 10:18 Pride was not made for men, nor furious anger for **them that are born of a woman**.

But otherwise, it is unattested in the LXX. v. 36 uses γενεα, which is the standard translation of דור. דור can mean both “race” and “chronological generation,” leading to the suggestion that γενεα in the NT may also mean “race” (e.g., Alford). But out of 42 instances of γενεα in the NT, BDAG gives only Lk 16:8 as an example of this usage, otherwise interpreting it chronologically, leading one to question that interpretation of Lk 16:18.

The best defense of γενεα as a distinguished class of people rather than a time period is Neil D. Nelson, “This Generation in Matt 24:34: A Literary Critical Perspective,” JETS 38/3 (September 1996) 369-385, but even he admits the basic chronological orientation of the word: speaking of the Lord’s usage, “ His use of the phrase has deliberate connections to the two most notorious generations in the OT: the generation of the flood, and the generation of the wilderness wanderings” (p. 373).

### **Justice, Mercy, Faith**

Justice = κρισις, which is dedicated (135x) to משפט, to which κριμα (173x) is also dedicated. These are the two main renderings of משפט.

Mercy ελεος is dedicated reciprocally (202x) to חסד.

Faith πιστις is dedicated (19x) to אמונה (and 5x translates אמת). Αληθεια translates אמונה also, 22x, but is dedicated to אמת with 82x. In the light of OT parallels, πιστις has more the sense of “faithfulness” than “faith.”

### **דעת אלהים**

This term in Hos 6:6 is parallel to “walk humbly with thy God” in Mic 6:8 and appears to reflect on πιστις in Matt 23:23. What does it mean?

Hosea uses is also in 4:1,

Hos 4:1 Hear the word of the LORD, ye children of Israel: for the LORD hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because *there is* no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land.

The only other OT use of the exact phrase is

Pro 2:5 Then [if you diligently seek wisdom] shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.



How about the verb, with יהוה or אלהים as direct object?

## ידע אלהים

This expression is at base deuteronomic, and with the exception of Hos 8:2; Job 24:1; Dan 11:32; 1 Ch 28:9, is always negative, speaking about serving, worshiping, or going after “other gods, whom ye [or your father] have not known.” The conjunction of serving a god without knowing him is curious. In the negative examples, it may be understood temporally: you will serve gods whom previously you did not know. Or there may be a semantic distinction: knowing (as in Gen 4:1) involves more than outward signs of service. It may reflect a covenant relationship that in the nature of the case cannot exist with a god who does not exist.

Given this background, it is striking that the noun phrase is based on ידע אלהים and not ידע יהוה.

Note the **parallel terms**.

Deu 11:26 Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; 27 A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day: 28 And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, **which ye have not known**.

Deu 13:12 If thou shalt hear say in one of thy cities, which the LORD thy God hath given thee to dwell there, saying, 13 Certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, **which ye have not known**;

Deu 28:64 And the LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, **which neither thou nor thy fathers have known**, *even wood and stone*.

Deu 29:26 For they went and served other gods, and worshipped them, **gods whom they knew not**, and **whom he had not given unto them**: [Geneva, Bishops, Gill: “which had given them nothing,” though the verb is singular]

Deu 32:17 They sacrificed unto devils, not to God; **to gods whom they knew not**, to new *gods that* came newly up, **whom your fathers feared not**.

Jer 7:9 Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after **other gods whom ye know not**; *imperfect, but talking about a future deviation: you don't know them now, but later you will?*

Jer 44:3 Because of their wickedness which they have committed to provoke me to anger, in that they went to burn incense, *and* to serve **other gods, whom they knew not**, *neither* they, ye, nor your fathers.

Hos 13:4 Yet I *am* the LORD thy God from the land of Egypt, and **thou shalt know no god** but me: for *there is* no saviour beside me.

Hos 8:2 Israel shall cry unto me, **My God, we know thee.**

Job 18:21 Surely such *are* the dwellings of the **wicked**, and this *is* the place *of him that knoweth not God.*

Job 24:1 Why, seeing times are not hidden from the Almighty, do **they that know him** not see his days?

Dan 11:32 And such as do wickedly against the covenant shall he corrupt by flatteries: but **the people that do know their God** shall be strong, and do *exploits.*

Dan 11:38 But in his estate shall he honour the God of forces: and **a god whom his fathers knew not** shall he honour with gold, and silver, and with precious stones, and pleasant things.

1Ch 28:9 And thou, Solomon my son, **know thou the God of thy father**, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the LORD searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts: if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off for ever.

## ידע יהוה

This expression does not appear at all in Deuteronomy. Again I've marked **parallels.**

Exo 5:2 And Pharaoh said, Who *is* the LORD, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? **I know not the LORD**, neither will I let Israel go.

Exo 33:13 Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, **that I may know thee**, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation *is* thy people.

Jdg 2:10 And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which **knew not the LORD**, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.

1Sa 2:12 Now the sons of Eli *were* **sons of Belial**; **they knew not the LORD.**

1Sa 3:7 Now Samuel did not yet **know the LORD**, neither was the **word of the LORD yet revealed** unto him.

Isa 19:19-21 In that day shall there be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the LORD. 20 And it shall be for a sign and for a witness unto the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt: for they shall cry unto the LORD because of the oppressors, and he shall send them a saviour, and a great one, and he shall deliver them. 21 And the LORD shall be known to Egypt, and **the Egyptians shall know the LORD in that day**, and shall do sacrifice and oblation; yea, they shall vow a vow unto the LORD, and perform *it.*

Isa 45:4-5 For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, **though thou hast not known me.** 5 I *am* the LORD, and *there is* none else, *there is* no God beside me: I girded thee, **though thou hast not known me:**

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Jer 2:8 The priests said not, Where *is* the LORD? and they that handle the law **knew me not**: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after *things that* do not profit.

Jer 4:22 For my people *is* foolish, **they have not known me**; they *are* sottish children, and they have none understanding: they *are* wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge.

Jer 9:3 And they bend their tongues *like* their bow *for* lies: but they are not valiant for the truth upon the earth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and **they know not me**, saith the LORD. ...

Jer 9:6 Thine habitation *is* in the midst of deceit; through deceit **they refuse to know me**, saith the LORD. ...Jer 9:24 But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and **knoweth me**, that I *am* the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these *things* I delight, saith the LORD.

Jer 10:25 Pour out thy fury upon the heathen that **know thee not**, and upon the families that **call not on thy name**:

Jer 24:7 And I will give them an heart **to know me**, that I *am* the LORD: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God: for they shall return unto me with their whole heart.

Jer 31:34 And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, **Know the LORD**: for **they shall all know me**, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Eze 38:16 And thou shalt come up against my people of Israel, as a cloud to cover the land; it shall be in the latter days, and I will bring thee against my land, **that the heathen may know me**, when I shall be sanctified in thee, O Gog, before their eyes.

Hos 2:19 And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. 20 I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and **thou shalt know the LORD**.

Hos 5:4 They will not frame their doings to turn unto their God: for the spirit of whoredoms *is* in the midst of them, and **they have not known the LORD**.

Hos 6:1 Come, and let us return unto the LORD: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up. 2 After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight. 3 Then shall we know, *if* we follow on to **know the LORD**: his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter *and* former rain unto the earth.

Psa 36:10 O continue thy lovingkindness unto **them that know thee**; and thy righteousness to the **upright in heart**.

Psa 79:6 Pour out thy wrath upon **the heathen that have not known thee**, and upon the kingdoms that **have not called upon thy name**.

Psa 87:4 I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to **them that know me**: behold Philistia, and Tyre, with Ethiopia; this *man* was born there.

Pro 3:6 In all thy ways **acknowledge him**, and he shall direct thy paths.

## Summary

To “know God” or “know the Lord” is more than just to know his name. As in Gen 4:1, the verb suggests a deep intimacy.

Parallels: those who do not know the Lord or God are wicked, or sons of Belial. Those who know him are upright in heart, fear him, and call upon his name.

Knowing God is the result of the new covenant (Jer 31; Hos 2).

The prevalence of the negative with אלהים, which we see 10 out of 14x (vs. 14/25 for יהוה), reflects the common phrase, “gods whom ye knew not.” That is, the reference is to pagan gods with whom Israel had no previous relation. But the negative dominates יהוה as well. Perhaps this reflects the need of the new covenant, and the work of the Spirit, to enable people to know the Lord.